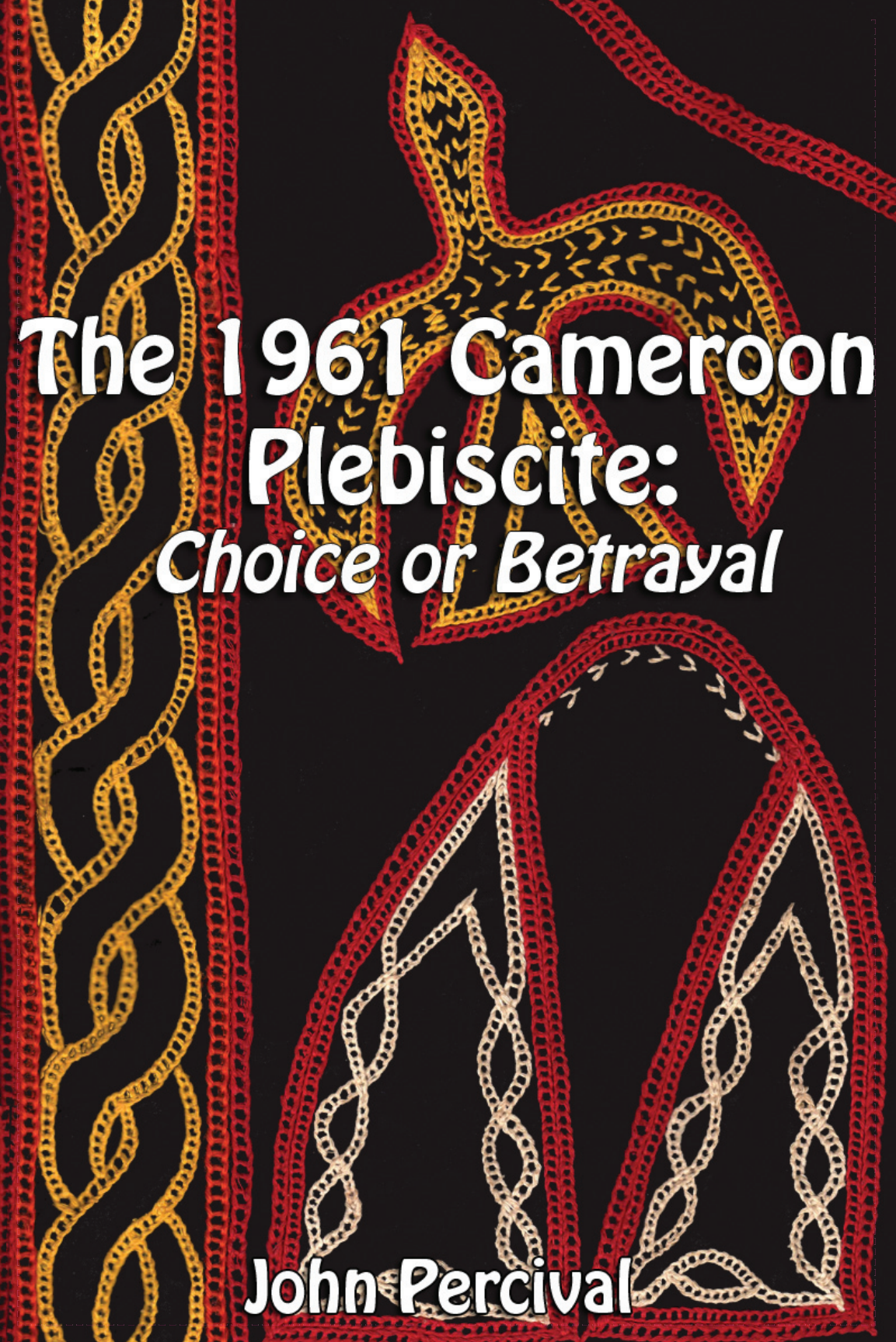




The 1961 Cameroon Plebiscite: *Choice or Betrayal*

John Percival

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Choice or Betrayal

John Percival

Edited by Lalage Neal



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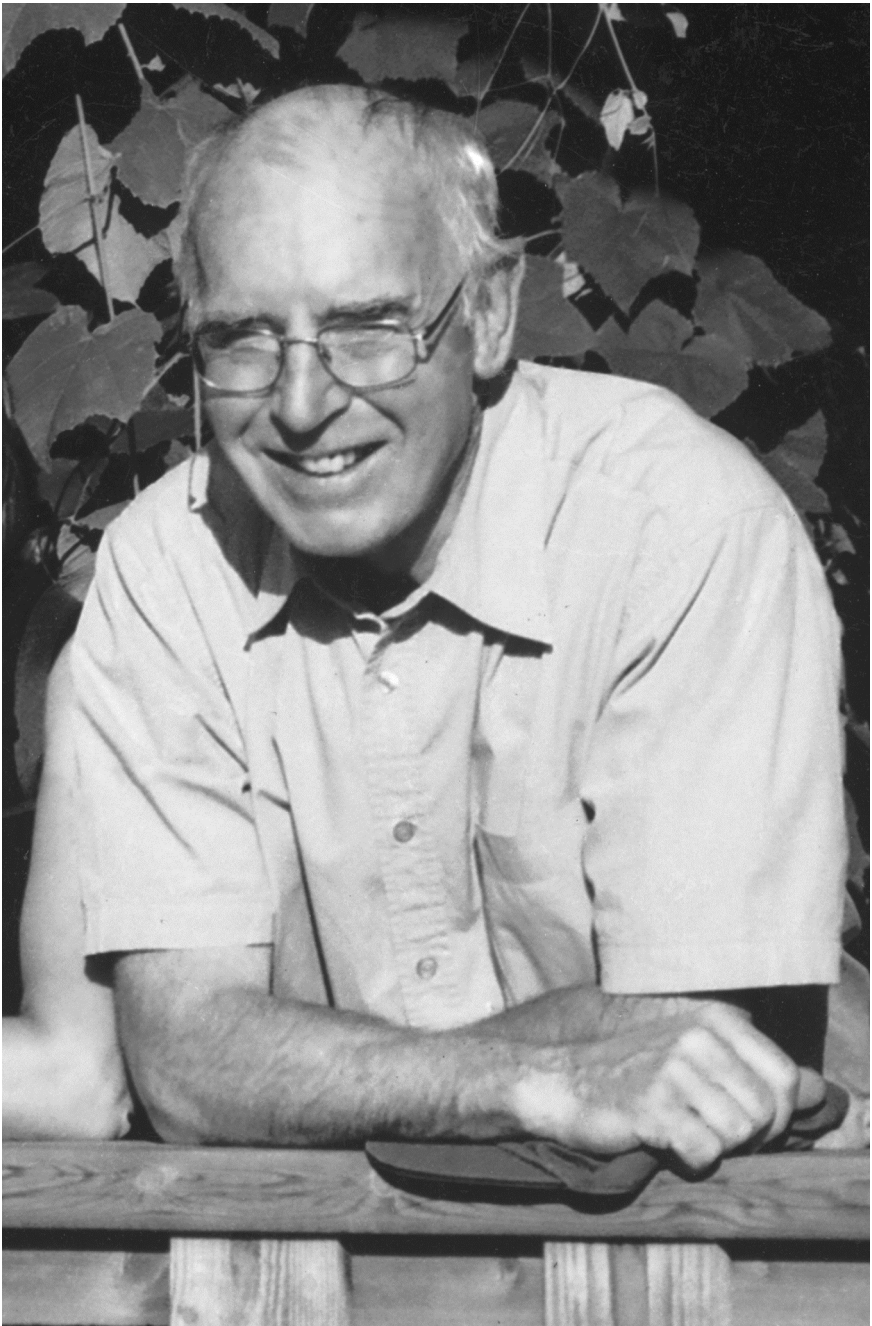
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In ever loving memory of my husband,

John Percival

25 May 1937 to 6 February 2005

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The 1961 Cameroon Plebiscite: Choice or Betrayal

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*I dedicate this book to our three children:
John's sons and my step-sons, Matthew and Daniel,
& our daughter, Eleanor*

Lalage Neal Percival

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Foreword

My husband, John Percival, was a passionate man, caring deeply about issues big and small. Whether it was his family, his allotment garden or the big socio-political questions, he was always curious, asking why, how and what could be done. His chosen method of doing something for change was television: in the 1960s the place to be for creative and intelligent young men and women with something to say, and John had an abundance of angry and impassioned things to say. He wanted to change the world, as he would admit in later years.

In 1960, after reading Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge and at the tender age of 23, he went to Cameroon, hired by the then British Colonial Office to “preside along with other Brits over the demise of a small part of the British Empire”. On his return from Africa he joined the BBC and eventually went into television where he was soon given freedom to speak his mind as well as wonderful opportunities that he grasped with both hands, often presenting his own programmes in a glorious *basso profundo* voice. He continued to make programmes and write learned and eloquent books throughout his life.

“Quite suddenly, an extraordinary prancing figure came galloping down the track towards me. It was a man with no face.... Above the faceless mask was the grinning skeleton of a monkey and around his wrists and ankles were bone bracelets that rattled as he danced.... A drummer lurked a short distance behind him, keeping up a wild staccato rhythm. Another man, close behind the dancer, lashed his head and shoulders with a bunch of dracaena leaves which drove him into extravagant bouts of leaping and posturing, but the most astonishing thing about him was his sheer power.... I stood as still as a tree, perhaps letting my twigs tremble a bit, but refusing to budge from the path.... I felt this character was trying to intimidate me and it made me angry—all the more so because he was so close to succeeding.”

His frankness could land him in trouble—what he said was sometimes uncomfortable for the Establishment to hear. Winston Churchill said: “I have a tendency, against which I should perhaps be on my guard, to swim against the stream”, a characteristic that John shared. He also “tended to kick upwards and nurture downwards”. He would see the flaw in someone’s argument, hear a lie, sense the hypocrisy of a politician’s case. He told people when they were wrong and they did not always appreciate it, especially his bosses. However his friends and colleagues also knew him as self-mocking, tolerant of human frailty, generous with his experience and his encyclopaedic knowledge and increasingly psychologically astute. He could be hilariously funny, occasionally mordant, mostly gentle.

“I was in the midst of my ablutions when a woman stuck her head into the tent and gave me a cheerful grin. I tried to wave her away, but she failed to go, so I threw my sponge at her, which simply made her laugh and come right inside the tent. She may not have been familiar with Europeans, but she was a great deal

less frightened of me than I was of her. In a mild panic I called for Pius.... Pius explained cheerfully...that the chief had sent her to help me with my bath ‘and anything else you want’, he added, with a giggle. In the end I had to get Pius to fetch the hunter to translate my politely phrased request that she should get the hell out of my tent.”

John was a pioneering television documentary maker who first harnessed his anger and passion to investigate the rich West’s legacy of empire. His programmes were radical, built around his great loves: anthropology, especially that of Africa, the environment and nature. He was one of the original reporters for the BBC TV series “Man Alive”. With his own landmark series in 1969, “The Family of Man”, he compared life in the English Home Counties and Colne, Lancashire, with that in Botswana, a Himalayan village and New Guinea. With his next controversial series, “Rich Man, Poor Man”, 1972, he was again in the vanguard, this time of the ecology and anti-globalisation movement. Inspired by E.F. Schumacher and Ivan Illich, he offered a personal analysis of Western consumerism and its damaging consequences to the developing world (John was an early critic of Coca-Cola and later McDonald’s).

His environmental concerns along with his training in archaeology and anthropology led to his ground-breaking and best loved series, “Living in the Past” (1978), featuring twelve young British people living for a year in a reconstructed Iron Age settlement in the West of England. In view of this last series, earnest and serious in its conception, it was an irony that he was called the true father of the ‘reality’ television genre—not a parentage of which he felt proud in view of that child’s development.

In 1984, he produced an award-winning television series called “Africa” with the historian, Basil Davidson, about its history. In 1995, he filmed and wrote “The Great Famine” in Ireland. Latterly he made programmes about gardening—a great love of his.

In childhood, he had been radicalised by, amongst other things, his teenage (‘arrogant’ he would later say) disapproval of his beloved father’s business, the sugar trade; by private misery at an English boarding-school; by his degree. Funnily enough, for someone by that time so anti-authoritarian, he absolutely loved his National Service. But in my view, the bomb that nearly killed the seven-year-old John and his family during World War II had a profound effect on his development. The family home was destroyed by a Doodle-bug, which left them deeply shocked and homeless.

This nurtured in him a healthy appreciation of the chance nature of life, an enduring fascination with how people survive in circumstances of hardship, with the human spirit and human ingenuity. But above all it was the question of identity, be it individual, tribal or national, that he understood as a fundamental seam in the human make-up and as a basic human drive.

When I came to know John in 1981, he talked about his time in Cameroon as a seminal period in his life. It formed, if not a bedrock, a very significant influence on his life thereafter. He was, I think, very happy there.

He always wished to return to Cameroon, something that in all his subsequent travels through his beloved Africa making television programmes, he had not done. He feared that a return would spoil the young man's dreams and memories of those halcyon days. However, in 2002 he re-read the many letters that he had written to his parents from Cameroon. He started to do some research; he met and talked to experts on Cameroon, such as Shirley Ardener, Dr. Ian Fowler, both generously helpful to John and more recently to me in editing this book, along with Germain Loumpet and Alexandra Galitzine. He started to contemplate a recce for a possible TV programme, a first return visit. To his delight, he managed to track down Nigel Wenban-Smith, the fellow plebiscite officer with whom he had shared lodgings, and persuaded him to accompany him on this visit.

They prepared their trip, each re-kindling old friendships and acquaintances in Cameroon. The date for departure was set for early January 2004.

Although still uncertain whether he could sell the idea as a TV programme, he decided to write a book regardless, about both the Cameroon that he had known in the early 60s and the 'new' country to which he would return. He was advised, wisely, that he should write about the then before he went, as the visit would inevitably contaminate his pristine early memories. He planned to complete the book with a section about Cameroon now. Luckily he almost finished his draft before he left. On his return it was indeed hard to integrate what they had seen and he felt stuck. Now I see that his difficulty was, unbeknownst to us then, compounded by the silent onset of his final illness. When he became ill, he picked up his pen and he managed to finish his manuscript two weeks before his death, producing this multi-layered account.

As much as anything it is the story of a young man moving from earnest innocence to a more considered appraisal of the situation in which he found himself, of someone having to re-assess the inheritance of colonial views. He is unconsciously exploring not only his own identity, but also that of the people and of the country of the pre- and post-plebiscite Cameroon.

Had John not been felled by illness, his intention had been to compare the microcosm of Cameroon to the macrocosm of pan-Africa. He was relieved to finish his memoir, but we had no time to discuss the next step. So I sent his manuscript to a handful of people. Mary Jay of the African Books Collective gave me the inspired introduction to the scholar, Dr Francis Nyamnjoh of Codesria in Sénégal. Dr. Nyamnjoh writes of a piece of "scientific importance, [making] a major contribution to a very significant period in the life of Anglophone Cameroon—the plebiscite. It provides an invaluable eye witness account of what happened in a key region of the Bamenda grasslands."

The publication would please John, not just because it has been accepted by the Langaa Group, but also because Francis Nyamnjoh has written the introduction, along with the historian Dr. Nicodemus Fru Awasom, both so eminently well qualified to do so.

It is apt that they have centred their introduction around the theme of ‘belonging’, which echoes John’s life-long preoccupation with our sense of identity as an underlying motivator. Seen from the perspective of psychoanalysis, the growing individual needs to develop a healthy sense of self and equally the society or nation to develop a unified but adaptable sense of identity. Both these systems unfold within a matrix of relationships which are supportive and flexible yet boundaried. So who I am is where I belong, even within diverse ‘belongings’. If either self or society is deprived of this, it will lead to disease and conflict.

It is a huge bonus that Nigel Wenban-Smith offered to write an epilogue, describing their return to Cameroon. His support, enthusiasm and energy for the project have been enriching.

John had a remarkable capacity to see the truth and speak it. In the latter years of his life, he became somewhat jaded by television and sometimes felt that his commentary on the world had been minimal. I disagree with him and hope that this small jewel will be a valuable addition to the literature on and debate about Cameroon as well as the latest in a long line of his original and worthwhile oeuvre.

Lalage Neal

London, 1 June 2008

Preface

This was written in 2002, before John started the book and before his return visit to Cameroon in 2004 with Nigel Wenban-Smith

What I think this is about

In 1960, at the age of 23, I was hired by the Colonial Office and seconded to the United Nations, to preside over the demise of a small part of the British Empire, in the remote Bamenda Highlands of the Southern Cameroons.

At that time, this was a very remote and exceptionally beautiful mountainous area in West Africa, only a few degrees north of the Equator. The hills were clothed in bright green grass, six feet tall in the rainy season, and there were great cathedrals of forest trees in the deeper valleys. People had made very little impact on this lush wilderness, but here and there were clusters of neatly thatched huts, interspersed with palms and banana plants, and surrounded by neat little gardens of maize and cassava. At first sight it seemed to be an equatorial Eden.

The British had rather negligently administered this little patch of Africa ever since the end of the First World War, but since it was a United Nations Trust Territory there was no profit in it. The result was that the territory was undeveloped, you might say backward, even by contemporary African standards. Now, the United Nations had decided that the territory should be granted independence, on condition that it amalgamate, either with French Cameroun to the east or with Nigeria to the west. To decide the matter there was to be a plebiscite, a referendum, which would also be the first ever excursion into democracy in this part of Africa.

I was given the task of conducting the plebiscite in two clan areas, each about the size of an English county. The job involved touring the area, locating the villages, conducting a 'public enlightenment' campaign, registering the names and birthplaces of everyone over the age of 21, sitting as a magistrate on cases to do with registration irregularities, and finally presiding over the plebiscite in my particular district on the appointed day. Along with 24 other plebiscite officers, thinly scattered throughout the territory, I was allotted a house and a Land Rover, a bag full of money and a sheaf of instructions, and left to get on with it.

The sheer arrogance of this enterprise still takes my breath away. In no way was I, or anyone else, qualified to impose such a process on thousands of people, and it was quickly made clear to me that they wanted no part of it and that they saw the whole thing as a sham, a cosmetic exercise in democracy. The only decision they were allowed to make was to choose whether to throw in their lot with Nigeria or French Cameroun, and they wanted neither of them. All the other decisions had been taken thousands of miles away by officials who thought they knew what they needed better than the people themselves.

But in many ways they already had everything they needed. They grew their own food, built their own houses, made their own tools and domestic utensils, fashioned their own clothes. The few things they could not make for themselves

they traded for in the local market. They provided their own entertainment, made their own music, and were extremely successful at finding their own ways of enjoying life.

They had also built for themselves a complex social structure that provided a framework for their lives. There was an elaborate kinship system that tied everyone to everyone else and ensured that even the most inadequate and impoverished were cared for by those fitter than themselves. In the absence of an effective colonial administration, an ancient hierarchy of chiefs and sub-chiefs provided a loose political framework that rested quite lightly on their shoulders, providing a means of settling disputes and a rudimentary system of justice. None of this was perfect, but it worked. People knew where they were, and despite the fact that they were poor, and that the women in particular had to work long, hard hours in the equatorial sun, everyone seemed to be quite unreasonably happy. What I was telling them was that all this was about to change, and that they did not have any real choice in the matter. Ahead lay only uncertainty, and an unwanted merger with one of two other countries much bigger than theirs.

At the time I was a bit of a prig. I thought I knew what was best for the people. I believed fervently in racial equality, self-determination and democracy. To my eyes, too much was wrong with everything I found around me. I disliked the implied superiority of my own status and the overt discrimination against women, let alone the unnecessary deaths of so many small children. I hated the dirt, the disease, and the superstition, but I could also see that many things were good.

In those days in the Southern Cameroons theft was almost unknown. I left my house unlocked, even though it was stuffed with things that must have seemed highly desirable to most of the population. There were violent incidents, some of them extremely unpleasant, but anyone who over-stepped the mark was likely to be hauled in front of the local court by his neighbours. Nobody starved. Nobody was alone or uncared for.

People also lived in balance with their environment. They had enough to eat because they did not place too great a burden on the land. They lived in beautiful surroundings because they had neither the means nor the inclination to spoil them. They could have gone on living, just as they lived then, for another few thousand years, and a dozen World Trade Centres could have crashed to the ground, the whole world economy could have gone into recession, and none of it would have made the slightest difference.

Of course I knew then that what we still call progress was inevitable and that there was no way they could escape change, but what I began to fear was that 'independence', and the accompanying changes in political administration, of which I was one small instrument, were likely to do more harm than good.

The visits I have made more recently to other parts of Africa have not encouraged me to be more optimistic about the benefits of the modern world. Certainly there are more cars about, better roads, more hospitals, more running water, and in many places far fewer children die in the first few days of life. But everywhere the promised advances of civilisation have failed to deliver any general improvement.

With few exceptions, the politicians of modern Africa are corrupt and violent men who rob and exploit their own people. The forests have been felled, the pastures are over-grazed and the fields are eroded. There is war in a dozen different countries, famine in many others, and hundreds of thousands of people are starving. The diseases that ravaged the Cameroons in my youth are still around, with the fearful addition of AIDS and new and more virulent strains of malaria. The neat little houses in the rural villages have given way to shanties of cardboard and corrugated iron. People are no longer content with the things they can make for themselves and yearn for the consumer goods they cannot afford to buy. Many have drifted into the towns and the labour in the fields has been replaced by unemployment, by prostitution, by violent crime, and inter-tribal warfare that turns even small boys into vicious killers. The kinship systems that used to provide stability and meaning to people's lives have fragmented, and many people are now alone and uncared for.

And yet, and yet, I am still astonished by the courage and resilience of ordinary African people. They have an extraordinary capacity for making the best of a bad job. In the worst imaginable of city slums children still work, still care for one another, still play enthusiastically and laugh their heads off for no apparent reason. Women still labour in whatever patches of ground they can find to grow food for their families, and they still have that enviable ability to find amusement in small things. Everyone—however miserable his or her circumstances may appear to be—seems to be able to live for the pleasure of the moment in a way that we, in the affluent west, seem to have forgotten.

I think, I believe, that Africans have a genius for living. By that I most emphatically do not mean that they are simple-minded souls who do not know any better. I believe that, despite everything that the world may throw at them, the small priorities of people's lives are different from ours. They look first to the group rather than to themselves. This is not to say that Africans are incapable of selfish or mean behaviour, but that their first instinct is to share their pleasures, and their good fortune when they can find it, with other people to whom they are close. It is a tendency that can be perverted, as we see in African politicians who grab what they can so that they can be generous to their own dependants, or in small boys who maim and kill on behalf of the dreadful militia that has adopted them. But it is also an enormous strength.

Western people, even intelligent, well-informed development experts, tell me that they despair of Africa. Aid projects, with millions of dollars behind them, still founder when corrupt officials siphon off their funds. Economies fail to grow. Epidemics seem to get worse rather than better. But this kind of analysis ignores the way in which uneducated, apparently helpless, people succeed in making their lives work, both for themselves and for others. There are daily miracles on every street corner. A group of women improvise a roadside market, spreading out their fruit and vegetables on fresh green leaves to shield them from the dust. A gaggle of children, orphaned by AIDS, share a few maize cobs they have scrounged or stolen from someone better off than they are. A bunch of roadside mechanics with rusty spanners somehow coax back into life some ancient truck, with half a million miles

on the clock, that should have gone to the graveyard years ago. It roars off in a cloud of smoke, carrying a huge load of miscellaneous goods, and a dozen intrepid passengers perched on top.

These things in themselves may not add up to very much, but they are small parts of a pattern of behaviour that enables people to carry on living when others might give up. In England, it only takes a few leaves on the line and half our transport system breaks down. There is a hiccup on the stock exchange and people talk of bankruptcy and ruin. A business goes bust, people lose their jobs and we expect depression and despair. I do not despair of Africa. I believe that Africa will go on facing war, pestilence and famine and still survive these disasters better than we could. We may be prosperous now, but if that prosperity were to be severely compromised by recession and mass unemployment, to say nothing of terrorist outrages, I hate to think how Thatcher's children might behave. Africans will survive partly because they have so little, but also because they are so good at making the best of what they do have.

I think this most of all of the women. They are so reliable. Watch a woman using her hoe. She has a baby strapped to her back and she leans to her task with her strong body, swathed in cloth, bowed over the soil. She does not hurry. The hoe falls on the earth with a slow, dependable rhythm, and she is not alone. Beside her half a dozen other women are bent over their hoes and are working them in unison. The blades cut out neat wedges of soil, each blade overlapping, but never colliding, with the one next to it. The women keep up the same pace for hour after hour, often singing as they work, until an astonishingly large patch of ground has been cleared and cultivated. You know they will go on to plant the maize and the beans and the groundnuts and that they will keep weeding and tending the crop until the harvest is ready. Then they will share their harvest, and each will feed her family. If the harvest fails, and it does fail far too often, the women will start all over again. And if that too fails they will start again. That, for me, is Africa.

So does this mean that I think that all development is bad, and that we should abandon all aid projects and forget all about removing CAP (the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy) tariffs to make African agriculture more competitive? Not at all. I simply think that we should have more humility. Just as we failed to ask the people at the time I was working on the Cameroons Plebiscite what kind of political system they could devise that would be better suited to their needs, we still insist on offering them what *we* think is better. So instead of hooking African countries on genetically modified seed, or selling them arms, or bribing cabinet ministers to sponsor big new development projects that are actually designed to benefit our own manufacturers more than theirs, we should go to the people and ask them what they really need to improve their day-to-day existence. Most of all we should go to the women and ask them what *they* need.

So now I want to go back to the Southern Cameroons and see if I can recapture some of the wonder that I felt the first time I started walking in those extraordinary hills. I want to see if the people have retained the ingenuity and resilience that enabled them to survive and prosper without any of the advantages of modern civilisation. I want to discover how they themselves have adapted to the changes of

the past forty years, what they have lost, what they have preserved, what, if anything, they have gained. I may meet again some of the young men and women, perhaps now bowed with age, who worked with me, or at least met me, all those years ago. I hope they will tell me frankly how I seemed to them, as well as what they thought of the job I was supposed to be doing.

I see the book partly as a series of reminiscences of what life was like forty years ago, both for the Africans themselves, and for myself as a very young man. The story of the plebiscite itself has a narrative form of its own, with a beginning, a lot of problems in the middle, some very funny, some sad, and an ending that is also a new beginning.

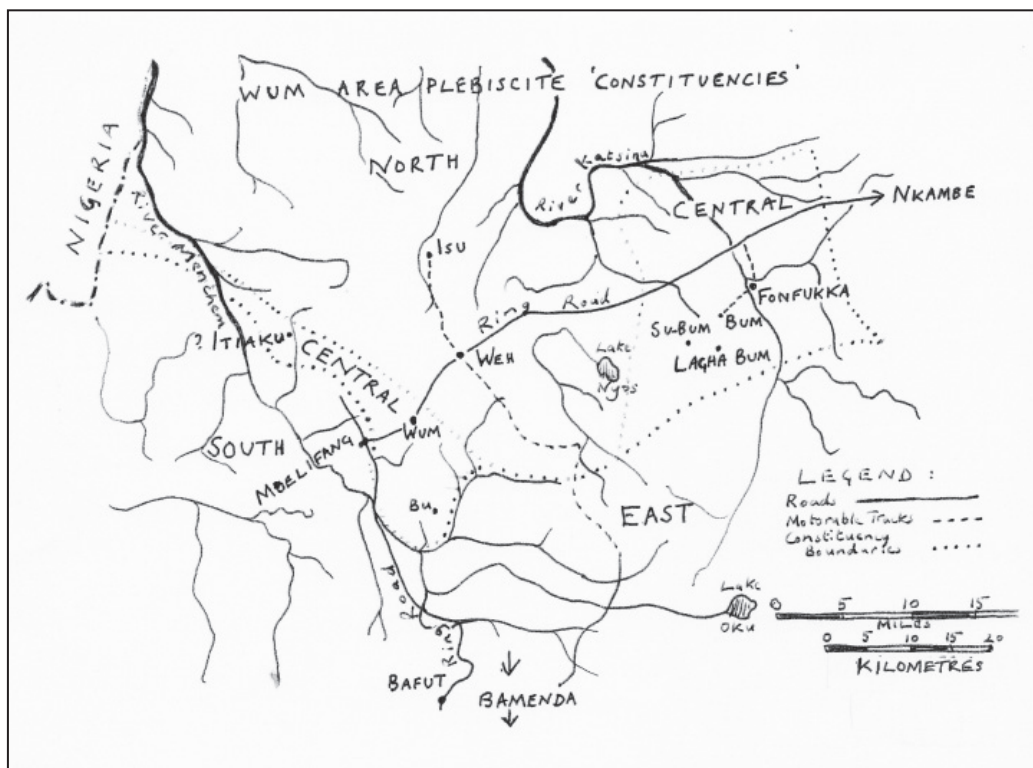
I also see the book as a series of reflections about the effect that the modern world has had on Africa. It is a complex story. Even the colonial authorities did many things with the best of intentions, but they were arrogant. They thought they knew best, and I think now, as I began to think then, that they would have done better to forget some of their own prejudices and listen to the people.

Most of all I would like the book to be a celebration of all the things I most admire about Africa. I have mentioned some of them here. There are others, but I have gone on enough for the time being.

John Percival
17 November 2002



Map of Contemporary Cameroon. From Milton Krieger, "Cameroon's Democratic Crossroads, 1990-4," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, 4 (1994), p. 604. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.



Source: Nigel Weban-Smith

Introduction:

Francis B. Nyamnjoh & Nicodemus Fru Awasom

A book like this is ultimately about belonging, its indicators, the various forms it takes in different contexts, its priorities, and how it is renegotiated over time. Political considerations determine and are in turn determined by economic and cultural interests, amongst others. The 1961 Cameroon Plebiscite, a political event, was not uninformed by the prevalent economic and cultural calculus of the time. Similarly the outcome has shaped perceptions and political, economic and cultural fortunes in Cameroon for nearly half a century. As George Nyamndi (2007) puts it, “the dust is still to settle over the troubling legacy. One just needs to stir the topic to see how dialectical passions flare.” As the precursor of the politics of belonging in postcolonial Cameroon, the 1961 Plebiscite deserves the detailed eyewitness account that John Percival offers in this insightful book.

The politics of recognition and representation at the heart of ongoing struggles for democracy the world over *are* pushing various communities to reappraise boundaries and belonging in fascinating ways. In Cameroon and Africa, belonging is as central to politics today as it was in colonial times, as the notion of a common citizenship becomes an ever more contested illusion. The reality and debate are informed both by contested identities sanctioned by the colonial and postcolonial states. Cameroon, like most of Africa, offers fascinating examples of how the term ‘indigenous’ was arbitrarily employed in the service of colonizing forces, of how peoples have had recourse to indigeneity in their struggles against colonialism, and of how groups vying for resources and power amongst themselves have deployed competing claims to indigeneity in relation to one another.

At independence and reunification following the 1961 Plebiscite, the notion of nation-building and a common ‘civic’ juridico-political citizenship was embraced and enshrined in the constitution. So was the idea and principle of Cameroon as a bilingual republic—bilingual in French and English and in recognition of the dual colonial heritage as the basis of a common citizenship. However ethnic cultural identities were revived as forces in regional and national politics by the modification of the Constitution in 1996 to provide for the protection of ‘indigenous’ minorities. This was meant to contest and take precedence over the vocal and highly critical Anglophone community as the traditional and legitimate minority in postcolonial politics. This development did not however weaken the articulation of belonging based on the reality of Cameroon’s triple colonial (German, French, English) heritage, a fact that has only further complicated what it means to be ‘indigenous’, ‘minority’ or to ‘belong’ in Cameroon. Communities large (Francophones and Anglophones) and small (various ethnic groupings within and crisscrossing the Anglophone and Francophone divide) have both accepted and contested arbitrary colonial

and postcolonial administrative boundaries and the dynamics of dispossession and/or aspiration.

Failing to achieve the idealized 'nation-state' form and being relatively weak vis-à-vis global forces, various Cameroonian governments have since independence often sought to capitalise upon the contradictory and complementary dimensions of civic, ethnic and cultural citizenships. Under colonial regimes of divide-and-rule, to be termed 'indigenous' was first to create and impose a proliferation of 'native identities' circumscribed by arbitrary physical and cultural geographies. Secondly, it was to make possible not only distinctions between colonised 'native' and colonising Europeans, but also between 'native citizens' and 'native settlers' among ethnic communities within the territory. Thirdly, it was to be primitive, and therefore a perfect justification for the colonial '*mission civilisatrice*', for dispossession and confinement to officially designated 'tribal' territories, often in callous disregard to the histories of relationships and interconnections forged with excluded others, or the differences and tensions even among the included. In all, to be indigenous was for the majority colonised 'native' population to be shunted to the margins.

If this negative history still shapes the highly critical stance of Cameroonian intellectuals and nationalists towards all claims of autochthony/indigeneity as provided for in the 1996 Constitution, it has also, quite paradoxically, tended to render invisible the everyday reality of postcolonial Cameroonians (including those same intellectuals and nationalists) as straddlers of civic, ethnic and cultural citizenships on the one hand, and of multiple global and local cosmopolitan identities on the other. A good case in point of overly essentialised belonging along regional and ethnic lines despite the sociological reality of individuals as relational beings is that of those commonly referred to as coming from the '11th Province'. Although Cameroon has only 10 provinces, the reasoning behind the 11th Province label is that no one, not even the reality of marriage and interdependence, shall put together what the state administration has put asunder. Thus, although by culture and practice Anglophones or Francophones, those informally and commonly labelled as 11th Province are expected to deny themselves the enrichment that comes with experience of difference or with cosmopolitanism. According to this logic, examples of 11th Province Cameroonians would include such prominent Anglophones as Martin Njeuma, Victor Julius Ngoh and Francis Wete, respectively of Basa, Beti and Bamileke parents, but who are Anglophones in upbringing, education and practice.

Such arbitrary and frozen identities pay scant regard to the reality of Cameroonians through the relationships they forge across administrative and cultural boundaries, be these ethnic, colonial, postcolonial or cosmopolitan. With growing uncertainties and the questioning of the inadequacies of civic citizenship and its illusions of autonomy, some majority and minority communities alike within Cameroon have become obsessively concerned with

rigid and highly exclusionary affirmations of being indigenous (regional, Anglophone or Francophone).

It is in the light of today's reality that the current eyewitness account by John Percival of the 1961 Plebiscite is particularly instructive on how identities are forged and renegotiated over time, even if the sociology of the process and phenomenon is not often acknowledged by political authorities. At the end of World War II, Cameroon became a Trusteeship of the United Nations, but remained under the British and French. From the outset Britain had decided against an independent administration for British Cameroon. It divided the territory into the Southern and Northern Cameroons, which it respectively administered as integral parts of Northern and Eastern Nigeria (Ardener 1962; Kale 1967; Ndifontah Nyamndi 2004). According to Kale, its administration of the territory prior to World War II was "haphazard and full of misgivings". "There was an apparent lack of administrative interest" which he thinks was due to "the fear that Germany might suddenly demand a return of her former African possessions". For this reason, Britain might have thought it "preposterous spending, and possibly wasting, British tax-payers' money and talent on what was not, strictly speaking, a developing British country" (Kale 1967:12-13). In Whitehall, the Cameroons was often regarded "as somewhat of a colonial liability", and administered all the way from Lagos, with hope of its "eventual integration with Nigeria". It had neither a separate budget, nor separate public accounts; all its government revenues were treated as part of a common fund (Le Vine 1964:194-201). The perception that Southern Cameroons was not viable enough economically to attract direct British investment is seen to have worked against its autonomy being offered as an option during the plebiscite. Similarly, its indirect administration through South Eastern Nigeria led to a growing feeling that "The real enemy was Nigeria ... [and] that Nigeria was diverting some of the benefits of trusteeship to itself... a feeling heightened by the overwhelming presence of Nigerians, particularly Ibos, in almost all walks of life in the territory" (Ndifontah Nyamndi 2004:40). It is hardly surprising, in view of these perceptions, that the plebiscite and its outcome took the form they did.

France on the other hand administered French Cameroon as an independent entity, giving it the full benefit of its policies of paternal 'association' and 'assimilation' (Ardener 1962; Gardinier 1963; Le Vine 1964; Joseph 1977). However the winds of change that blew across the continent in the 1950s and early 1960s did not leave Britain and France unaffected, reluctant though they were to grant independence.

With Nigeria and French Cameroon both independent, there was a pressing need to define the future of the British Cameroons. Under the auspices of the United Nations, a plebiscite was conducted in the territory in February 1961. Due to what was largely seen at the time as the result of manipulation of votes by Britain, the Northern Cameroons voted to become part of Nigeria. For

its part, the Southern Cameroons opted for a federation with La République du Cameroun, despite the voices which advocated a union with Nigeria. In spite of a “popular” disinclination for an “early reunification after secession from Nigeria” (Ardener 1967:302), the UN never gave the people that option; the only choice was between Nigeria and French Cameroons (Ardener 1962, 1967; Le Vine 1964:206-14). Also, the boundaries of the reunified territory “were not willed by those who wished for reunification”, but were imposed on them. Consequently these boundaries were much narrower than they would have been “if a simple reconstruction of German Kamerun had been achieved” (Ardener 1967:288). Some have argued that, from a legal point of view, Cameroon was never colonised by France and Britain. This is an argument that fails to take account of the fact that Europe’s scramble for Africa was in itself illegal, both under their individual European constitutions and in the eyes of the African states whose say was ignored.

Following a conference at Foumban in July 1961 between John Ngu Foncha (Kamerun National Democratic Party, KNDP) and Ahmadou Ahidjo (Union Camerounaise, UC), the unified territory became known as the Federal Republic of Cameroon, comprised of two states - West and East Cameroon - each with its own Prime Minister and Assembly. Ahidjo became the Federal President but soon began to think the idea of a federation was expensive and wasteful. He started scheming for a single unified party. In 1962 he suppressed East Cameroonian multipartyism and in 1966 merged his party, the UC, with West Cameroonian parties to form the Cameroon National Union (CNU). By 1972 reunification had been achieved through a combination of political intrigue and manipulation (Médard 1978:41; Bayart 1985:109-38; Konings and Nyamnjoh 1997, 2003). In May of that year, the federation was replaced by a united republic which was to last until two years after Ahidjo’s resignation in November 1982. This change, which the authorities termed ‘The Peaceful Revolution’, also involved the division of the country into seven administrative units known as Provinces, namely: Littoral, Central-South, East, North, West, North-West and South-West.

Like his counterparts elsewhere in Africa, Ahidjo spent more than twenty years consolidating his supremacy as President and as Chairman of the party, maximizing his personal powers and centralising government (Medard 1978; Etonga 1980; Bayart 1980; Bayart 1985:141-82). Having initially been forced to adopt a federal constitution in order to facilitate reunification with Southern Cameroon, Ahidjo was to gear his politics towards increased centralisation aimed at assimilating Anglophone Cameroon and at weakening all opposition, including the authority of the traditional political elite. He succeeded so well in this quest that he virtually dominated all public and political institutions. He held executive power as both Head of Government and State, controlled legislative power as Chairman of the party and subdued the judiciary through direct appointments. In this way, he was able to impose his authority

over the party, Government, Parliament and administration (Médard 1978:40-42).

In November 1982, Ahidjo resigned and was constitutionally succeeded as President by Paul Biya, who promised to build a more democratic society. In 1984 President Biya carried out a series of constitutional changes, which embodied, *inter alia*, the creation of three new Provinces South, Adamawa and Far North. There was also the change of name from the 'United Republic of Cameroon' to the 'Republic of Cameroon'. This move attracted criticism from certain Anglophone academics who saw it as an attempt to influence historical traditions in favour of the French heritage. The critics argued that the only neutral and acceptable change of names would have been a return to the German Kamerun, when the country was one to all Kamerunians. As Kofele-Kale (1980) has argued, Cameroonians look up to the German era not because Germany left behind any sense of 'Kamerunianness' as such, but rather because it provided the framework for the future concretisation of what Ardener (1962) termed the 'Kamerun Idea', the idea of a people united by the common feeling of facing the same challenges under German colonialism.

As Konings and Nyamnjoh (1999) have argued, a major opportunity to lay to rest the long-standing Anglophone Problem was missed during the constitutional reform debate in the 1991-96 period when the Anglophone elite proposed a return to the federal state and even drew up a draft federal constitution. At the end of this process, which was fully controlled by the Government, the 1996 Constitution introduced a new classification of Cameroonians: those who belong to autochthonous minorities and those who do not. No attempt was made to define this bizarre concept, but the Anglophone minority problem was carefully fudged. This attempt by the regime to re-conceptualise 'belonging' was obviously aimed at safeguarding its own survival. Finding it hard to win free and fair elections in the new multi-party system and to meet the Anglophone challenge to the unitary state, it felt obliged to encourage the resurgence of local identities. This the regime especially promoted amongst groups which were likely to support its continued stay in power and to stretch the conventional ideas of minorities to such ambiguous proportions that historical minorities like the Anglophones were denied minority status in the 1996 Constitution. Instead, Biya remains adamant that it would be a betrayal of the founding fathers of nation-building to make any concessions to forces seeking secession or the fragmentation of Cameroon. Yet the systematic marginalization of Anglophones and their institutions only seems to further radicalize this community through groups such as the Southern Cameroon National Congress (SCNC) (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003). Also, while Biya is hesitant to make concessions to Anglophones seeking better recognition and representation, he does not hesitate to tinker with the Constitution (1996 and 2008) in ways that further undermine this community and the democratic tenets of a common civic citizenship in Cameroon.

The aim of this lengthy preface is simply to provide a context and background to John Percival's *The 1961 Cameroon Plebiscite: Choice or Betrayal*, a thorough, insightful, rich and enlightening firsthand source on the 1961 Plebiscite, which has never been told before in this way. The work will indeed serve as a useful historical source for a long time. Percival's account is what might be termed an 'accidental source of history', given that the book might never have been published if the author had abandoned the assignment; the author finally decided to write his account as an eyewitness and an active participant of the plebiscite events, which occurred almost half a century ago.

Percival was hired to serve as a Plebiscite Supervisory Officer (PSO) in the Cameroons with the responsibility of conducting the administrative work and publicity in connection with the plebiscites on behalf of the British Colonial Office and the United Nations. His area of operation was the Wum Division, today known as Menchum and Boyo Divisions, which he, along with Nigel Wenban-Smith, his colleague, combed and crisscrossed in their meet-the-people tours. Perhaps this book was provoked (especially following his return to Cameroon in 2004) by the Anglophone Problem which came to the fore and became a prominent political issue after the reintroduction of multipartyism in 1990 (*cf.* Konings and Nyamnjoh, 1997, 1999, 2003; Abwa 2000; Anyangwe 2001; AAC 1993; Awasom 2003-4; Dinka 1985; Foncha 1990).

Although the Anglophone Problem has been the preoccupation of several scholars, it is still complicated by contradictory discourses and outright misrepresentations. The role of Foncha and Ahidjo in the reunification movement has been largely exaggerated depending on the agendas of the various authors. Ngoh's argument is that Foncha's level of educational attainment and character disqualified him as a good negotiator with Ahidjo and that the outcome of the plebiscite is what Anglophones had already bargained for. Consequently Anglophones carry the overwhelming blame for the outcome of the plebiscite and have no legitimate right to complain (Ngoh 1999, 2001). Francophone authors generally approach the Anglophone Problem from a hegemonic perspective that corresponds to the stance of the postcolonial central Government. They refuse to recognize that there is any Anglophone Problem because Anglophones freely voted to join La République du Cameroun, and the historical act of nation-building is therefore sealed (Kamto 1995; Kom 1995). At the same time, the very same Francophones have subsequently proceeded to excel at national deconstruction through problematic modification of the Constitution to provide for ethnic citizenship and the politics of belonging (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 1998, 2000; Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003:139-161). Francophone academics are particularly hostile towards federalism or separatism, which they consider as a misplaced priority. If they consider decentralization of any kind, this should be undertaken within the framework of the powerful unitary state. In practice this entails a continuation of the process of assimilation through prudent administrative reorganizations, which

Anglophones have come to see as a danger to their imagined or real Anglo-Saxon values, the practice of which constitute an Anglophone identity in Cameroon. Others have reduced the Anglophone Problem to a simple problem of misunderstanding that emanates from different perceptions of the other (Abwa 2000).

Where can Percival's work be situated within this on-going debate on the Anglophone Problem?

Percival's cogent eyewitness and active participant account deconstructs the rumours and misrepresentations about the February 1961 Plebiscite which was a prelude to reunification. Percival reveals that English-speaking Cameroonians in the then Wum Division questioned the plebiscite options of joining either Nigeria or la République du Cameroun on the grounds that Nigerians were "cannibals" while "Frenchy people" were robbers. They wondered why two evil options were being presented to Southern Cameroonians in the place of independence, or in the last resort continuous British administration to prepare the territory for statehood. At the beginning of the plebiscite campaigns, Southern Cameroonians persistently questioned the logic of British withdrawal when the territory needed more time to sort itself out under British tutelage. As Percival puts it: "many Southern Cameroonians continued to plead for the colonial administration to be prolonged for a little longer, to give them a chance to make informed decisions about the future" (see below), but both the UN and the colonial authorities had no option but to refuse.

John Ngu Foncha, the architect of the reunification of the two Cameroons was asked a question on Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) after the resignation of Ahmadou Ahidjo in 1982 whether there was an accord with Ahidjo which provided for a ten-year trial period for the reunification experiment before its definitive implementation. Although Foncha refused to confirm the existence of any accord of that nature, John Percival's book provides a clue to the origin of such a strong and persistent rumour in Anglophone Cameroons which Chem-Langhee (2004) has dwelled on.

The rumour was circulated by Foncha's KNDP because they had not worked out the terms of the union of the two Cameroons with Ahidjo before the plebiscite. The plebiscite questions for the Cameroon voters were contained in a booklet entitled *The Two Alternatives* (see appendix) which was used to enlighten the population before the plebiscite. The booklet contained what the two camps had to offer the electorate. It was in reality a campaign booklet for the reunification with the République du Cameroun camp and the integration with the Federal Republic of Nigeria camp. The booklet did not favour the reunificationists because the terms of union with the République du Cameroun were not clearly spelt out. Percival notes that, although the conditions under which the Cameroons were to join Nigeria were clear, the "implications of joining the République du Cameroun, on the other hand, [were] not at all clear,

either in the preamble, or in the text that followed” (see below). The pamphlet simply stated that that the Foncha and Ahidjo camps had held several meetings to decide the terms on which union between the two countries might take place. They indicated that a federal union was their preference, but the document was silent on the clear division of power between the federal and state governments and only emphasized the overwhelming powers of the central Government. Little wonder that Francophone politicians and academics familiar with this lack of clarity have tended to think that their community did the Anglophones a favour, only for the latter to turn around claiming rights and entitlements, and to complain about Francophone assimilation and domination.

In contrast to the arrangements for the République du Cameroun, the terms for union with Nigeria described in *The Two Alternatives* were lucidly spelled out in detail. They provided the Southern Cameroons with regional status within the federation, with its own parliament on an equal footing with the other Nigerian regions and powers to decide on its own affairs, apart from certain federal Government matters such as fiscal and defence policy, that are enumerated one by one. The area of competence of the Southern Cameroons and the Nigerian federal Government was clearly presented, unlike the terms of union with the République du Cameroun. However the document stated that “if the Federal Government and the Southern Cameroons Government were both to legislate on a subject on the concurrent list (these subjects are all spelled out within the text) the Federal Law would, in the event of inconsistency, prevail”. There was provision for two Houses of Parliament, both at federal and regional level—one for elected representatives, the other for a House of Chiefs. The document provided for a separate regional civil service, consisting only of Southern Cameroonians, and a separate legal system, including a High Court in Anglophone Cameroons with full jurisdiction in civil and criminal matters.

It should be understood that the Plebiscite Supervisory Officers were expected to carry out the Public Enlightenment Campaign in an impartial manner, using *The Two Alternatives* as a bible. They were to present the contents of the booklet the way they appeared. John Percival and his colleague Nigel Wenban-Smith were confronted with distressing difficulties in explaining to voters the exact terms of union with the République du Cameroun, but it was easy for them to explain the terms of union with Nigeria because they were clearly stated. John Percival and his colleague Nigel Wenban-Smith along with fellow plebiscite officers were therefore seen in pro-reunification circles as campaigning for Nigeria which was not the case. This explains why the *Nkough* masquerade common in the region that informed this book, and which John Percival has captured so well, had to confront and intimidate dissenters during the plebiscite sensitization campaigns. The Foncha government had to make up for this weakness in the campaign document that provided no clear terms of union with the République du Cameroun by spreading rumours according to which there would be a trial period of ten years for the reunification of the

Southern Cameroons and the République du Cameroun. After this trial period, the people of the Southern Cameroons would decide either to continue in the union or call it quits. Chem-Langhee (2004) has detailed these rumours which the KNDP camp had to generate to win votes. Foncha even went as far as unilaterally preparing and circulating an alternative document which provided for a very loose union between the Southern Cameroons and the République du Cameroun; the British administration quickly denounced it.

Percival also makes a useful revelation, namely that Ahidjo was not a diehard reunificationist because of his misgivings about the Southern Cameroons. Ahidjo's viewpoint was that the Southern Cameroons "with its majority of Christian and pagan voters might well turn out to be a political liability". Percival opines that "Ahidjo would probably have been quite happy to see the Southern Cameroons united with Nigeria. What Ahidjo really wanted was union with the largely Muslim Northern Cameroons, which was holding its own plebiscite at the same time". Writers who have been crediting Ahidjo as a champion of reunification may have to reconsider. Again, here one sees evidence of why Francophone politicians and analysts continue to feel that Anglophone Cameroonians have everything to be grateful for in view of 'the political liability' that they have always been perceived to be. In the light of this reasoning, instead of claiming rights and entitlements, Anglophone Cameroonians should be happy to have been assimilated and to have contributed actively to their cultural, political and economic integration with Francophone Cameroon.

Foncha's shortcomings are evident in Percival's work. Percival speculates that Foncha could have been bought off in some way and that it is highly likely that he was offered the Vice-Presidency of the new federation, if it should come into being, because that was the office that eventually came his way. A law professor at the University of Buea, Dr. Jonnie Fonyam, argued during a faculty seminar in 1994 that he does not buy the idea that Foncha was attracted by promises of becoming Vice-President in a future Cameroon federation when the prospect of being Prime Minister of his own state was a more agreeable option. Some of the UN officials in the Cameroons felt Foncha should have driven a harder bargain while he still had the power to do so.

Percival, however, equally highlights useful arguments about the role of Britain in preparing the Southern Cameroons for independence and argues that the British did not do enough. As a plebiscite officer, he started becoming disenchanted as he interacted with the people to enlighten them on *The Two Alternatives*: he "felt that the British Government had abnegated its responsibilities, forcing the people to make a difficult decision, with far-reaching consequences, without adequate preparation" (see below). This stance takes some of the heat off Foncha who has often been blamed for being a poor negotiator. In the nation-building endeavour of African nation states on the eve of independence, who assumes responsibility for drafting the independence

constitution—the African political elite abandoned to themselves or the colonial administration?

Percival reveals the thoroughness of the preparation and organization of the plebiscites against a background of a multitude of difficulties including poor infrastructure. That notwithstanding, the plebiscite results for the entire territory were announced on 14 February 1961, with 233,571 Southern Cameroonians voting in favour of joining the République and only 97,741 voting to join Nigeria.

Many Anglophones are unaware of the fact that the plebiscites were held without prior constitutional agreements between the political elite of the two Cameroons. Once the Southern Cameroonians had voted to join the République du Cameroun, they had little margin for negotiation again. That is why Percival writes that "...Premier Foncha and the other leaders of his KNDP party were not in a strong position when it came to bargaining with the leaders of the République". At the much spoken about Foumban conference in July 1961, Ahidjo laid out his own terms for a new federal constitution, which were confirmed in all important respects at a second conference in Yaoundé, the federal capital, later in August 1961. On 1 October 1961, the Southern Cameroons joined the République du Cameroun in a federal union as a federated state.

John Percival's account offers us an opportunity, in the light of current realities in Cameroon, not only to put certain developments into a historical perspective, but also to appreciate 'indigeneity' or belonging as a process subject to renegotiation with the rising expectations of individuals and groups. For one thing, political, cultural, historical and, above all, economic realities determine what form and meaning the articulation of belonging assumes in any given context. The possession of rights is something individuals and communities may be entitled to, but who actually enjoys these rights does not merely depend on what individuals and groups may wish for, or are entitled to by law, by birth or by a universal declaration of one kind or another. Increasingly and quite paradoxically in Cameroon and elsewhere, globalisation and the accelerated flow of capital, goods, electronic information and the migration it occasions, are exacerbating insecurities, uncertainties and anxieties, bringing about an even greater obsession with autochthony/indigeneity, and the building or re-actualisation of rigid notions of belonging.

Productively addressing these surging uncertainties and anxieties is hardly to be accomplished through a narrow and abstract definition of belonging, much less in any politics of exclusion and difference within and between groups, be they local, national or foreign. The answer is not simply to shift from a state-based to a more individual-based universal conception of citizenship, since this fails to provide for the rights of collectivities, however construed. The answer to the impermanence of present-day achievements lies in incorporating 'outsiders' without stifling difference, and in building new partnerships across those

differences. The answer, in other words, is in a cosmopolitan life informed by allegiances to cultural meanings drawn from different sources in the rich repertoire of multiple, kaleidoscopic encounters by individuals and groups. There is a need and a hope for a cosmopolitanism, informed by relationships that are not frozen in time and space, that will make it possible to feel at home away from home. Only in this way can prevalent perceptions among Anglophone Cameroonians of the 1961 Plebiscite as a betrayal be mitigated.

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1. *plebiscite*

It all began around the end of the first week in June 1960, shortly after I graduated from Cambridge. I had changed course for my third year and finished up by reading Part One of the Archaeology and Anthropology tripos. A friend, who had done the same course and knew that I yearned to go to Africa, drew my attention to one of those small ads, which at that time still covered the whole of the front page of the Times. The advertisement was placed by the Colonial Office and called for applicants for the job of Plebiscite Supervisory Officer in the Cameroons. I had to look at a dictionary to discover the exact meaning of the word ‘plebiscite’ and a map of Africa to find the location of the Cameroons. The section under British administration looked terribly small, squeezed into the armpit of Africa, between Nigeria and the much larger territory administered by the French.

I still have the typewritten foolscap sheet that I received in reply to my first enquiry. “Men”, it says—no feminist nonsense in those days—“are required to conduct the administrative work and publicity in connection with the plebiscites”. There followed a brief description of the job, which was meaningless without further explanation, and some vague warnings about having to spend a large amount of time “on tour, often under very difficult conditions.” The salary was given—£167 a month, unbelievable riches—but there was nothing about the historical background, no mention of the United Nations, or of what Trust Territory status implied, only the address of the Director of Recruitment at the Colonial Office.

I turned up for interview in best suit and tie at the appointed time. I was very nervous, especially as I knew very little about the prospective job. I had gleaned a little about the original German colony, the mandate under the League of Nations following the First World War, and the later trusteeship arrangements under the umbrella of the United Nations, and I was vaguely aware that the plebiscites were intended to decide whether the British-administered northern and southern parts of the country were to be joined with Nigeria to the west, or with the about to be independent République du Cameroun to the east. I had read some papers by the anthropologist Edwin Ardener about the Bakweri people on Mount Cameroon. I had also read *The Bafut Beagles*, by Gerald Durrell, and although there was something about the style that warned me that Durrell had a flexible approach to the facts, it was the only book entirely devoted to the country that I had managed to find. I did not feel well equipped for a searching interrogation.

The interview was certainly daunting, but not quite in the way I had expected. It was held in one of those vast panelled rooms in the Colonial Office. Four or five distinguished old buffers were seated on one side of a mahogany

table the size of a small airstrip and there was one chair on the side opposite. It seemed a very long way from the door to the table and a very long time before anyone invited me to sit down. No doubt the old gentlemen wanted to see if I appeared to be made of the right stuff. It quickly became apparent that they were not in the least interested in how much I knew about the Cameroons. They were not even particularly concerned about my university degree. They had heard of my school (a hateful place). They wanted to know if I was good at games. I was not. What about National Service? Better here. I had served as a subaltern in a respectable if undistinguished regiment. What about my family? Anyone in the Colonial Service? Fortunately yes, a cousin in Nigeria. One of the old buffers thought he had met him. I think that was probably the clincher.

There followed a cursory medical examination, dire warnings about 'Health in Tropical Climates' and the importance of always wearing a hat. There was also a clothes list. The total allowance for everything from hat to stout walking shoes was £30, which was stingy even then, but the list included the helpful suggestion that inexpensive articles of dress, including appropriate shorts and a Palm Beach suit, were obtainable from Alkit, in Cambridge Circus. One other essential item of equipment was a steel chest, to guard my possessions against termites. It was to be stencilled with my name and the address of the Mountain Hotel, Buea. I still have mine in the attic.

At some point in the recruitment process, though it was never clear when or how this mutation would occur, I learned that even though I had been recruited and was to be paid by the Crown Agents, on behalf of the Colonial Office, I was to consider myself seconded to the United Nations Secretariat for the duration of the tour. In retrospect it seems like a typical British bureaucratic fudge. We were to be neither fish nor fowl, neither fully authorised as employees of the United Nations, nor proper colonial servants. No doubt this might have been helpful, in diplomatic terms, if anything had gone seriously wrong in the organisation of the plebiscite. However, I do not remember being dismayed about it at the time.

No further information was forthcoming until I received orders to report for a flight to Lagos, with connecting flights to Calabar and Tiko, some time around the end of August 1960. The flight was long, but uneventful. I identified several other Plebiscite Officers by their new clothes and nervous expressions and we began to get to know each other. At the gimcrack little airport in Tiko, we were greeted by a large and cheery Yorkshireman named Tallantyre. If I ever knew his other name I have forgotten it. He introduced himself as Tal and Tal he remained for the six months of the assignment. He told us that he was the Assistant Plebiscite Administrator in an unlikely-sounding place called Wum, three days' journey to the north, and that the six of us in the group of new arrivals would all be working to him. We would each be assigned districts of our own, which we would have to get to know like the backs of our hands, and we would report to him at intervals throughout the period of the assignment.

However, for the first couple of days we would be staying at the administrative capital, Buea, where we would be briefed on our duties and supplied with equipment for the duration of our stay.

One of the first images to stick in my mind, probably as soon as we left the airport, was my first sight of a mammy wagon. This ubiquitous form of transport, usually a converted Bedford lorry in those days, was really a bus, but it was a very different kind of bus from any I had seen before. The whole of the back of the vehicle was built up with planks of timber, with rough bench seats arranged crossways, and the surrounding timber-work as brightly painted as a fairground roundabout. Across the front was a scrolled headline shouting 'Jesus Saves' in lurid yellow, and the whole rickety superstructure was packed with people—huge women swathed in brightly-coloured cotton, hung about with bundles and babies, children in school uniforms, old men with hats on clinging to the benches, young men in shorts and T shirts nonchalantly standing up as the vehicle bumped along. Even then it seemed to me that the mammy wagon was a metaphor for Africa's headlong rush towards the future—a hybrid between modern machine and local improvisation, overcrowded, dangerous, but ebulliently optimistic.

The sun went in as we began the ascent up the lower slopes of Mount Cameroon. It was damp and foggy on the way up to Buea, and it grew damper and foggier the higher we climbed. I was fascinated by the luxuriant vegetation and the decrepit roadside shacks, each with its clump of bananas and its scatter of chickens. In Buea itself I was struck by the larger residences on the road, which looked to me rather like the grander villas in an old-fashioned Bavarian holiday resort and it was obvious that most of these must have been built for the Germans. The contrast between these splendid old houses and the huts of the natives told me a great deal about the historic relations between black and white without even having to ask.

The Mountain Hotel was a long low building, like an overgrown bungalow, with a large dining-room and a bar that reached out on to a veranda overlooking a damp and chilly garden. There was a fireplace in the hallway. Is it my imagination, or did they have a log fire burning in the grate? Anyway, I remember little about the meetings we must have had or the people I must have met, but over the next couple of days there were several briefing sessions. It soon emerged that Tal did not know much more about the Cameroons than we did. He had retired as a senior agricultural officer, and had then applied for this six-month assignment in much the same way as the rest of us. I will not say it was the blind leading the blind, because Tal had immense experience of life, great good humour, and considerable wisdom, but he knew very little about the history, geography and politics of West Africa. He also knew little about fishing. He had seen that I had a rod with my luggage and immediately decided that I should be appointed to Wum town itself, because there was a crater lake, which

his own house overlooked, just north of the town. In the event the lake, which was very beautiful, turned out to be devoid of fish.

The briefing sessions told us quite enough about the various stages of the plebiscite, the tasks we had to undertake, and the deadlines we had to meet, and almost nothing about the underlying political situation. I think in retrospect that this was entirely intentional. We were to be concerned with the process, not with the politics, and we were warned, repeatedly, that we must not express any opinion either way about the choices we were to place before the people. At the end of each briefing session we each received a set of typewritten instructions and multiple copies of various documents, the most important of which were the voting registration forms. There were also various items of stationery, and I remember that the envelopes were not gummed, as a precaution against the damp. Instead, we were each issued with a little jar full of lumps of gum Arabic. Apparently we were supposed to infuse these lumps in boiling water to make the glue to seal the envelopes, but there were no instructions as to how to do this and no brush with which to apply the stuff. I never did get the hang of gum Arabic.

More immediately useful was a small sack full of money, most of it in the form of West African pennies, with holes in the middle. There were 12 of these to the shilling, 240 to the pound; the cash was so heavy that five pounds worth of small change felt like a fortune, and we were solemnly warned that we would have to account for every penny of it. We were also each allotted a set of camping kit, which seemed to me to be cumbersome and unnecessarily lavish. There was a large green tent, a camp bed, a table, a camp chair, and a cook box complete with plates and saucepans and all the other equipment that the Colonial Service deemed appropriate to our needs. There was even a canvas bath.

Like the others, I also took possession of a brand new Land Rover, complete with driver. My own driver, Daniel, was delightful—young, self-confident, quite fluent in English. He was completely uninterested in politics and extremely interested in girls—an enthusiasm that they evidently reciprocated. Fortunately, he was also a careful driver, more out of concern for the shiny new vehicle than anything else, but I was grateful all the same.

Almost as soon as we were fully equipped we set off for Wum. The first leg of the journey would take us to Kumba, and then on to the rest house at Mamfe, on the Cross River. In the Army I had always been used to travelling in convoy, but this was not required of us here, so Daniel and I set off on our own. I had no map, but Daniel assured me that there was only one road, and that it was one way. That is to say we could travel up it on odd days and down it on evens—or was it the other way round? Whichever way it was, the road was appalling. Early September was towards the tail end of the rainy season and the road was no more than a track gouged out of the forest floor. The surface was pitted with craters, with great outcrops of bare rock in some places and deep

pools of mud in others. The carcasses of dead trucks that had failed to finish the journey appeared from time to time between the trees on either side of the track. I quickly developed a lively appreciation of Daniel's skills as a driver.

For most of the way the road wound through great cathedrals of trees. To begin with, there were stately plantations of oil palm. I remember being intrigued by the stacks of palm kernels, each fruiting body like a vast, solid bunch of dates. Then we were into the forest, surrounded on all sides by tall straight trunks under a deep canopy of the darkest green. From time to time we passed a string of shacks by the roadside, some roofed with palm fronds, some with rusty corrugated iron. It was raining heavily. Men and women carried banana leaves over the heads to protect themselves from the downpour. Chickens fled for their lives at our approach and small, half-naked children stared at us, their eyes luminous with curiosity.

Kumba I saw only as a much larger agglomeration of the same kind of shacks we had seen along the road. Mamfe made more of an impression because of the big steel bridge over the Cross River, where the view opened up to show the great sluggish stream, with muddy banks and sandbars along its length, and the forest closing in on either side. I stayed the night at the rest house in Mamfe. I remember a palm-roofed cabin and a bed with a huge mosquito net. I also remember going alone to the restaurant. Daniel had disappeared, assuring me that he would make his own arrangements, and taking the Land Rover with him. I dined in solitary state at one end of a large table with a Tilley lamp—one of those pressurised kerosene lanterns—hissing overhead, and the waiter padding silently in and out, but what made the strongest impression on me was a huge spider that hung upside down on the ceiling at the edge of the pool of light. It was directly over my head and every now and then it would lunge clumsily at one of the insects flying crazily around the lamp. It was so big that I could hear all eight of its feet, scratching against the woven matting of the ceiling. I ate my dinner in a state of terror, convinced that next time it jumped it would lose its footing and fall, scrabbling wildly, down the back of my neck.

The following day we drove up into what was then known as the grasslands region around Bamenda. This is a high plateau, ridged with hills up to two thousand metres above sea level. The area was named after its most prominent feature—endless rolling expanses of tall grass, which grows well over two metres in height in many places. In the deeper valleys, and along the lines of the rivers, the grassland gives way to woodland, and on the hilltops there are craggy outcrops of rock. It is a region of spectacular beauty, with long vistas of hills and valleys reaching as far as the eye can see. Even on first acquaintance it makes a powerful impression and I fell in love with the grasslands at first sight.

Around midday we reached Bamenda and drove straight up to the Club, which was on high ground beyond the town centre. This establishment fulfilled all my expectations of what a colonial outpost would be like. It was a pleasant building with a wide roof, set in a garden of trees and shrubs, with a view

looking out over the town. Daniel parked the Land Rover under shade trees and two uniformed Club servants came to help me with my luggage. Inside was a pleasant bar and a dining-room, which opened out on to a beautiful veranda overlooking the town. Two of the other Plebiscite Officers had got there before me. One of them was Nigel Wenban-Smith, with whom I was destined to share a house, and the other was Chris Edwards, who was also to set up house not far from Wum. Nigel was tall, slim and blond, charming, but slightly reserved. Chris was short, plump and dark, with a sharp sense of humour.

I was also introduced to a friendly couple named Marriott who had taken on the job of making us feel at home. He was an agricultural officer, managing a banana plantation, experimenting with new strains and instructing farmers in the best methods of cultivation. She was a Colonial Wife, one of those powerful women who followed their husbands to the remotest regions on earth, and ran their households with an iron hand. Mrs Marriott had been asked in advance to undertake the serious business of finding us each a cook/steward as the nucleus of a domestic support system.

Of course I had no experience of servants and I could not understand why one was required. I was quite capable of looking after myself, or so I thought. However, there did not seem to be any choice in the matter. We were all invited up to the Marriotts' house the following day to meet the young men who had been assigned to us in advance. I was duly introduced to Pius. Needless to say, he was a product of the Roman Catholic mission. He was short, but powerfully built, with huge shoulders and the arms and legs of a weight lifter, but he was also extremely shy. He spoke quite good English, but in a voice so low and mumbling that I often had difficulty understanding him. I think he also had quite a lot of difficulty understanding me. However, he had a wonderful smile and an air of honesty about him that made him immediately likeable. We agreed on a wage of six pounds a month, which seemed to me to be shamefully low, but this was what I had been instructed to offer, and the deal was done. Pius stayed with me for the next six months and I never had cause to reproach him. He once had cause to reproach me, but more of that later.

Much as I liked Pius, it seemed to me at the time that I might have got on even better with a woman as a cook/steward, and of course in many ways this would have made far more sense. Ignorant as I was of local customs, I knew perfectly well that West African men did not normally cook and clean for their families, so why should they cook and clean for a European? I thought then, as I still think now, that the British colonial custom of appointing men as domestic servants was meant to protect the virtue, not of black women, but of young single white men. It also had the effect of reinforcing the white man's curious status. As I was later to discover, even the most eminent Cameroonian chiefs had female domestic servants, not male.

I did not of course raise any of these reservations at the time. Pius climbed aboard the Land Rover and we set off for Wum. On the way we passed the

town of Bafut, famous as the place where Gerald Durrell had made his headquarters during his animal collecting expeditions. Beyond Bafut the road wound steeply up a thickly wooded escarpment that formed one bank of the Menchem River. It was as muddy and rocky a ride as the first leg of the journey up to Kumba, with the interesting difference that the traffic was two way, not one. Every now and then a mammy wagon would come lurching and bumping round a bend in the opposite direction and Daniel would have to take evasive action, sometimes pulling right off the road until the danger was passed.

Wum, or Wum Three Corner as it was usually known, was a triangular village green-come-marketplace, surrounded by a litter of sheds with corrugated iron roofs. Behind and beyond these were hundreds of the neat square-walled and steeply thatched houses of the local people, interspersed with palms, bananas and paw-paw trees. I knew immediately that I would like the place. We drove through the town and up the hill to the station. The word 'station' in colonial terms usually meant a district headquarters, but in Wum in those days this was no more than a handful of houses—bungalows really, with wide tin roofs—and one old thatched house overlooking the lake. One of the bungalows belonged to the District Officer, Jack Griffin, and the thatched house was Tal's headquarters. Another building served as a rest house and this is where Nigel Wenban-Smith and I were lodged for our first few days in Wum.

Tal had immense natural authority and he was very clear about what we had to do, but at the same time he was relaxed, informal, and delightfully hospitable. The district where he exercised control over the plebiscite stretched from his own headquarters at Wum in the east, right across the grasslands plateau to Nkambe and Mbem, close to the border with Cameroun in the east. He had managed to obtain some maps for us, issued by the Federal Surveys Department in Nigeria. I still have mine. It is short on detail, with only the vaguest indication of contours. The most significant feature to be seen is the so-called 'ring road'—in reality not much more than a dirt track with a few stone-built bridges along the way—which runs in a rough circle all around the area of the grasslands. The map is also marked with dozens of villages that we never found and not marked at all with dozens more that we did. There are plenty of empty spaces for someone to scribble 'here be dragons.' However, Tal was able to indicate approximately where we would have to operate.

My own areas of responsibility were the clan areas of Aghem, a rough triangle embracing Wum town itself and stretching westwards to the border with Nigeria, and an entirely separate clan area, thirty miles to the east, known simply as Bum. When Tal told me that the principal town was called Fonfukka I had to stifle schoolboy snorts of laughter. Nigel, with whom I was to share a house in Wum town, was allotted a large district to the north called Fungom. Tal reiterated the various stages of preparation for the plebiscite, which would be spread over the next five and a half months. We were expected to tour our separate areas on foot, identifying all the centres of population, registering the

names of all the people of voting age, making arrangements for a simultaneous polling day in all the diverse villages, supervise the poll itself and then ensure that the ballot boxes were returned, unopened, to a central collecting point. There were various other stages on the way, but this was the essence of the job.

It astonishes me now that none of us thought that there was anything odd about dropping a bunch of inexperienced young men into an extremely remote region of Africa, and expecting them to conduct such a complicated process, with the minimum of resources and very little supervision, on the assumption that they would bring the whole elaborate exercise to a successful conclusion. Of course pioneer colonial officers of previous generations had done far more, with even less support, but that was the whole point. Even though the plebiscite meant self-determination, and was an essential precursor to complete independence from colonial rule, the attitudes of the British administration were still colonial. We fresh-faced youths from good schools and reliable middle-class families were the last of the colonial officers, and like all those generations before us, we were expected to get on with the job. Officially we were known as Plebiscite Supervisory Officers, or PSOs.

First we had to conduct a process known, with perhaps unconscious condescension, as a 'Public Enlightenment Campaign.' The plan was to combine the initial tour of our so-called clan areas with a series of public speeches, describing the process of the plebiscite to people who had never voted before. (There had in fact been at least one election a year or two before, but the franchise had only extended to men with a certain amount of property, whereas this ballot was to be open to all men and women over the age of 21.) We were required to explain the procedures for registration and balloting and the broad aims of the whole enterprise, without venturing into any discussion about the choices the people would have to make. I could see that it would be wrong for us, as supposedly neutral officials, to appear to be biased in advising people which way they should vote. If we did so, the whole operation would be called into question as fundamentally flawed and undemocratic. At the same time, it looked as though it would be difficult to explain the way the plebiscite was supposed to work without touching on the political consequences. And so it proved.

We were given a few days to settle in before launching ourselves on this assignment. Nigel and I, together with our stewards Pius and Lucas, were allocated a brand-new house on the eastern outskirts of the town, at the beginning of the ring road leading to Fungom and Bum. The house was not prepossessing. It was an ugly grey building of stone and concrete, with a shiny roof of corrugated iron, which lay on a slope below the road, with a shallow U-shaped drive that might have been designed to ensure that a slough of mud and water would form at the front entrance whenever it rained. Since it rained every day, the area around the front door was permanently muddy, but fortunately the house was built on a raft of concrete, which kept the floor clear of the water.

There was a small veranda in front, with just enough room for a couple of chairs and a table. Inside there was a living-room, two bedrooms and a small kitchen area, with a passage down the middle giving access to all four rooms. The walls were of bare stone, the floors of concrete, but there were beds, tables and chairs provided by the Public Works Department. I was delighted with these luxurious living arrangements, because I had imagined that I would be living in a mud hut.

Nigel had the bedroom at the back, which had a view across the surrounding countryside, and I took the one at the front. Of course there was no electricity or running water, but that did not seem much of a hardship. The only thing that bothered me was that the kitchen was entirely devoid of furniture. There was no sign of an oven, not even a chimney or a hearth for a fire. Pius and Lucas simply shrugged, and said they would make an oven out of an empty kerosene can. There were small kerosene stoves and pots and pans in our cook boxes and they seemed to be content with these. After a couple of weeks the kitchen was also equipped with a kerosene fridge, a luxury I had not even imagined. It made an unpleasant smell and emitted a lot of black smoke, but it kept the beer cold and the meat fresh. It also kept out the flies.

The house was set in an acre or so of rough grass and there was a small scatter of outbuildings at the back. Two of these were square thatched houses, very like those in Wum town, which were intended as quarters for Lucas and Pius. I remember feeling uneasy that they had been assigned to these outhouses, but both men took up residence with evident satisfaction. In the space between the buildings there was also a well and a little further down the hill to the left was a small thatched shed that served as a latrine. Inside was a box with a hole in it, perched on top of a narrow shaft. When we first arrived it was impossible to see the bottom of this noisome pit, but as time went by it was possible to make out a shiny seething mass of maggots. They emitted a constant low hissing sound, which reached a fresh crescendo whenever anyone made use of the box. It was not a latrine for the faint hearted.

Nigel and I settled in. With Tal's help we both found interpreters, who would translate for us and also become our agents, hiring carriers and messengers, and later helping to recruit temporary officials for the conduct of the plebiscite. I met Samuel Kum, a slender young man about my own age, with a ready smile and a very light complexion, who spoke fluent English. Samuel in turn introduced me to many of the leading personalities in Wum. For the other clan district, Bum, I would have to find another interpreter. Nigel met Joseph, a remarkable man, older and more experienced than Samuel, who carried an air of authority about him. Joseph was an elder in the Presbyterian church in the nearby town of Weh and he was very well respected throughout his home area. I know that he and Nigel eventually became good friends, but I was dismayed to discover how difficult it was, especially in the early days, to break down the formality in relations between black and white.

The formality was essentially racist in that it was based on a distinction between European and African, between master and servant, and this distinction stemmed from the earliest days of colonial rule, even though many colonial officials themselves were remarkably selfless men. Many of them saw themselves as true public servants, appointed to remote and inhospitable countries to be of service to the people, and however naïf or self-deluding this may appear to 21st century cynics, I honestly believe that a large proportion of those men gave the best years of their lives, sometimes life itself, in service to others. The racist attitudes that certainly pervaded the whole colonial system came not so much from the administrative officers as from the much larger number of engineers, traders and plantation managers, whose only motive in coming to Africa was to make money.

However, there is no doubt that there was a strong assumption of white superiority in the whole colonial process and the imminent prospect of independence did little to diminish it. One of the great evils of colonialism, to my mind, was the corrupting effect it had both on the rulers and the ruled. What I had not reckoned with was the way I would be corrupted myself. I had taken on this job full of high liberal principles. I had always argued fervently in favour of self-determination for all African countries and had once been arrested for civil rights offences in the United States. Martin Luther King was one of my heroes. But within weeks, or was it days, of my arrival in Africa, I found myself behaving very much like one of the old colonial masters.

It began with the servants. Despite his enormous physical strength my steward Pius was exceedingly deferential. He made it very clear from the start that I was not expected to do anything for myself and that his peace of mind depended on my giving him clear orders that he would ensure were carried out. To help him do so he persuaded me to employ a small boy, for some derisory sum, who would do some of the chores. In due course we employed a small small boy as well. I would give orders to Pius. Pius would pass them on to the small boy, and the small small boy would do all the actual work. This was inside the house. Outside there was also a compound boy (actually a man of about forty) and eventually a horse boy as well. All these men and boys insisted on dealing with Nigel and me as though we were princes of the blood. However, this deference was not extended to everyone, especially if his skin happened to be black.

Shortly after setting up house in Wum, I invited one of the local headmen to the house to offer him a few beers and ask his advice as to how to proceed with the Public Enlightenment Campaign. The headman had not travelled widely. His only dealings with Europeans, as far as I know, had been with the District Officer, whose manner was apt to be seigneurial, and he was ill at ease in the sitting room. I was also surprised to see that Pius was not as courteous towards him as I would have wished. Pius soon disappeared. The small boy, Lomas,

served the drinks, and even Lomas seemed a bit dismissive in the way he plonked a bottle in front of my guest.

Conversation languished as I strove to make the old man feel at home. To me he was an important figure in the community, and I myself wanted to treat him with respect. When the time came for him to leave I offered him a lift in the Land Rover. Since I also had to go into town I invited him to take my place in the front, next to Daniel the driver, while I myself climbed into the back.

To my surprise the vehicle did not move. I had already told Daniel where to go, but he made no attempt to start the car and move off. I repeated my instructions and still he made no move. Eventually I got out and asked Daniel to join me a few yards away so that we could have a quiet word, out of earshot of my guest.

“What’s going on?” I asked. Up to this point, Daniel had always been cheerful and amenable enough. Now, he looked angry.

“I am not driving like this. I am your driver, Sir,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked, still not getting the point.

“I am not driving this vehicle with that nigger in the front!” He shouted, loud enough for the headman to hear.

I was shocked, completely taken aback, but I could also see that if I insisted on his driving the whole situation could easily degenerate into a public slanging match. I made Daniel give me the keys and drove the headman home myself. All the way into town and back I swore to myself that I would give Daniel the sack. His use of the ‘n’ word had been unpardonable. But then, I thought, where did he pick up that word, if not from a white man? And if he is behaving in this way it must be because his own status depends on his being the white man’s driver. If he is seen to be ferrying the locals about he loses face. He might as well drive a mammy wagon. It also seemed highly likely that none of his experience of Europeans in the past had prepared him for my own eccentric behaviour. In his eyes it was I who was behaving badly, not him. The same was probably true for Pius. Obviously, it was one thing to fetch and carry for the man he insisted on calling Master, despite all my protestations, and quite another to do the same thing for one of the locals, whom he probably regarded as his social inferior.

In the end I shrank from the task of trying to explain to Daniel why his attitude was so utterly wrong. I simply told him that I would sack him if he ever behaved like that again, and left it at that. But it was not really he who changed his behaviour. It was I. Never again did I ask anyone, except another white man, to sit in the front of the Land Rover while I sat in the back, and very rarely did I invite local people to my house without priming Pius very carefully in advance. I began to see that I was going to be obliged to behave like a colonial master whether I liked it or not.

If the servants had not driven this message home, I would have learned it from the other people I met on my trips around the immediate neighbourhood.

Everywhere I found that I was treated with exaggerated respect. Men would rise to their feet as I entered a room. Women were even more deferential, stepping aside from a path to let me pass, often bowing their heads and lowering their eyes. I regret to say that although this behaviour made me feel exceedingly uncomfortable during the first few weeks of my stay, I quickly came to take it for granted, and was mildly surprised when anyone showed less than total deference in my presence.

The big local event was the eight-day market at Wum Three Corner. I do not know to this day why the market was held once every eight days rather than once a week, but that is how it was. It was an important event, because at that time there were no permanent shops in the town, and the market was the only opportunity for anyone to do some serious shopping. It was also a splendid opportunity to gain familiarity with the many different peoples who lived in Wum and its surrounding districts, as well as some of the visitors from further afield.

The majority of the people who gathered in the market place were locals, who at that time were generally known as Tikari and were thought to belong to a number of different related clans. I now understand that the alleged Tikari origin of the grasslands peoples is the subject of learned dispute, but in those days there was little published material to draw on and Nigel and I just had to accept what we were told. The local women sat on the ground, dressed only in a single piece of cloth, surrounded by small piles of produce that they had grown on their own plots. According to season, these might include bananas, cobs of maize, cassava roots, a few oranges, small heaps of coco-yams and almost always a bowl or two of ground corn meal, which was always sold at one penny for a cylindrical fifty-cigarette tin full. In fact all the little piles of fruit and vegetables were also sold for the same amount, for this was the penny-penny market, the mainstay of the local economy.

There was also a smaller group of women who offered calabashes full of milk and butter for sale. These were the Fulani, taller and more slender than the local women, with paler skins and narrower features. They often traded in kind rather than cash, exchanging a cup of butter for a tin of corn meal or a bowl of milk for a hand of bananas. Some of these women were strikingly beautiful. They and their men folk were pastoralists from the north, who grazed their cattle on the grasslands, and they belonged to two distinct clans, whose names I rendered at the time as Archu and Bororo. The Fulani took great care with their appearance. Young Archu men wore white tunics and short white breeches and often carried long swords in red leather scabbards. The Bororo women usually covered their hair and wrapped themselves about with colourful robes, but the young Archu girls often went bare-breasted and bare-headed, braiding their hair with beads of copper and glass, despite the fact that they were supposed to be Muslims.

Around the edges of the market place were a number of permanent stalls with roofs of corrugated iron. These were usually manned by smart young men in nylon shirts and trousers, who came into town only on market days. Most of them were Ibos from eastern Nigeria and the goods they offered for sale were gaudy enamelled pots and pans, bolts of colourful wax-printed cloth, kerosene lamps and other manufactured goods, very much luxuries for the citizens of Wum. At the bottom end of the market were the butchers, Hausas from northern Nigeria in flowing robes of blue or white. In front of each stall they displayed the great horned head of the steer they had killed, so that customers could judge the exact stage of decomposition of the gory piles of meat and entrails that were offered for sale, always enveloped in a swarm of flies.

There were several other distinctive groups who came to the market to buy and sell. Prominent among these were a scattering of male traders who lacked the urban polish of their wealthier rivals and sat on the ground, with their wares laid out on raffia mats. They included one or two hunters, with their long-barrelled black powder muskets beside them, together with a grisly display of bush meat—shrivelled and smoke-blackened joints of monkey and antelope. There were also a few herbalists, offering bunches of dry leaves or little pots of powdered root, and some patent medicines that always seemed to offer cures for everything, with special attention paid to lack of sexual potency. Other tradesmen might be potters or weavers or blacksmiths, with an array of spearheads, of hoe blades and iron knives. But the most distinctive group of all was female—Esimbi women from the forest. They brought their fruit and vegetables to market in deep baskets woven around two sturdy wooden struts, close together at the top, wide apart at the bottom. They carried these baskets on their backs, the top ends of the struts suspended by a band around their foreheads and the lower ends supported on their ample buttocks. The Esimbi were very small, some no more than four feet tall, and the women went naked except for two bunches of plaited fibre carried fore and aft, attached to a string around their waists.

On that first eight-day market, Nigel and I wandered through the market place, absorbing all these impressions and looking as conspicuous and out of place as a couple of Esimbi women in a Tesco supermarket. It was our first introduction to the varied constituencies with which we would have to deal over the next few months, and we were both keen to get out of the town and into the bush so that we could get to know them better.

2. *enlightenment*

For the first Public Enlightenment Campaign we PSOs had to go ‘on trek’. This phrase simply meant that we would have to walk instead of driving around in our Land Rovers, and, like the use of the word ‘bush’ to describe the surrounding countryside, the word ‘trek’ was a hangover from German colonial rule, prior to the First World War. In the early 1960s there were still a few old men around with a smattering of German, but the lingua franca everywhere in the Southern Cameroons was pidgin English. We were told at the time that there were more than thirty different languages in the territory, and I suspect that there were more like three hundred, because many of the dialects were mutually incomprehensible from one valley to another. So pidgin English served as a vital means of communication, not just between the handful of foreign nationals in the country, but between the Africans themselves.

However, not everyone spoke pidgin, and all the information relating to the plebiscite had to be translated into the local vernacular. So when Pius, Daniel and I set off in the Land Rover for Bum, only about thirty miles to the east of my base in Wum, we took with us an interpreter named Stephen, who had been born and brought up there. Stephen was a large, ungainly man, with a straggly beard and a permanent frown. He wore a red handkerchief knotted around his head and carried a ‘cutlass’, a machete as long and heavy as a short sword. He would not have looked out of place on a pirate ship, but despite his villainous appearance he was actually rather timid, starting apprehensively whenever I spoke to him and staring at my feet whenever he spoke to me. I did not have total confidence in Stephen, so I was mildly surprised, when we arrived at the turning in the road for Fonfukka, to find that his advance arrangements were in order and a team of young men were waiting to carry my gear.

Pius had supervised the packing of the equipment, and as we unloaded the back of the Land Rover I was embarrassed to see how much stuff was supposed to be needed to keep me safe and well on my travels. Tent, chair, table, bed, cook box and clothes had all been bundled up into separate loads, and these lay in a heap by the side of the road, while Stephen and Pius haggled with the boys who were to carry them. I say boys, because most of them looked about eighteen. Their feet were bare. They were dressed in shirts and shorts that had seen better days, and they all looked pleased at the chance of making a little money as they lined up, a bit awkwardly, to say hello and shake my hand. I said goodbye to Daniel the driver and arranged to meet him at the same spot a week later. I must confess that I felt a slight pang of apprehension as the Land Rover disappeared down the road, but the sense of being alone in an unfamiliar place was quickly dispelled by the realisation that I was not alone at all. On the

contrary, I was surrounded by an almost excessive number of other people, all of whom had a vested interest in my welfare.

With surprising ease, the young men lifted their clumsy parcels up on to their heads and prepared to set off down the track to Fonfukka. Stephen took the lead, swinging his cutlass and swiping at the grass as he walked. This did not look strictly necessary, but he said there were often snakes on the path, which may or may not have been true, but certainly helped to set the atmosphere. I followed, Stephen and Pius came next, carrying a small bundle of his own. Then came the six carriers and a flotilla of small boys, who had appeared from nowhere, as small boys always do in Africa, and, as we threaded our way through the tall elephant grass on my first real working assignment for the plebiscite, I felt as absurd and anachronistic as some 19th century explorer in search of the Nile.

The primeval beauty of the surroundings reinforced this sensation. The path wound its way along the edge of an escarpment, up and down the ridges on the hillside. In places there were huge rocks hard up against the path, and all around us were small thorn trees, half disappearing in a sea of tall grass; beyond the nodding heads of the grass I could see the surrounding mountains. They were not dramatically high, but the emerald green of the grass was broken in many places by the darker green of forest trees in the gullies and many of the hills were crowned by the great stacks of granite boulders that I had noticed on my first day in the grasslands. In the distance I could hear what I imagined were bird calls, though to my unfamiliar ears the protracted howls and shrieks sounded more animal than avian, as though someone was slowly killing a cat. Then I heard the drums. The sound rolled like faint thunder through the hills, first in one place, then in another, as drum answered drum. I asked Stephen what they were saying.

“Dey say you coming, Sir” was the only reply.

This was ridiculous. It was as though the drums, the landscape and the wildlife had been laid on to create an audio-visual background for my fantasies about Stanley and Livingstone. However, in less than an hour we arrived on the banks of what I knew from the map to be the Kimbi River, and I could see that we had actually been trekking down the middle of a substantial road—the Cameroons equivalent of a motorway—because the overgrown track opened up to reveal the approach to a stone bridge. Unfortunately the bridge had been swept away. Water swirled around great lumps of rock and concrete on the river bed and there were foaming channels of deeper water in between. I wondered how on earth we were supposed to get across until I noticed that a long wispy hammock of forest vines was strung across the river from one tall tree to another, horribly distant, on the far bank. The bottom strand consisted solely of a long string of canes—not bamboo, but what I later learned to be branches from the raffia palm—and these were lashed, one to the other, to form a fragile inverted bow across the furious river. Loops of thinner fibre attached these frail

strands to two grass ropes, one on either side, that sagged like monstrous clothes lines between the two trees. The whole apparatus looked just about strong enough to support a squirrel.

“Tie-tie” said Stephen.

Without a pause, he slipped quickly up a raffia ladder and almost ran across this spider’s thread of a bridge. There was nothing for it but to follow. Only in a fairground, where there is at least some expectation that things are not really as dangerous as they look, have I ever felt as sick and dizzy as I did when crossing that swinging tie-tie. What nobody had explained, and I had not envisaged beforehand, was that it would lurch so much at each step that I was fearful of losing my footing, and that instead of offering a degree of support, the grass ropes on either side would give at each tug like rubber bands. To make matters even worse the whole thing sagged horribly under my weight, so that I had to descend one half of the swaying hammock until my feet almost touched the water, and then begin the slow haul up the other side. I did not distinguish myself, crossing that tie-tie.

Of course the carriers behind me not only skipped lightly across the bridge, but managed to do so with their heavy loads still balanced on their heads. They were all on the other side in a matter of minutes, complete with our ever-growing escort of small boys, and we resumed the march to Fonfukka. All around us were small fields, dotted with clumps of banana and patches of maize. Here and there, stands of raffia palm, with fronds like giant arching combs, lined the banks of the small streams that threaded the landscape. A few women were still bent over their hoes, but most of them were hurrying homewards with baskets of produce on their heads. The drums were louder and more insistent, and it was obvious that everyone was assembling to attend the meeting on the plebiscite.

As we approached the outskirts of the town I could see that a large crowd had gathered in the main square and as we drew nearer I realised that preparations had been made for my reception. The chief, or so it appeared, was waiting on a raised platform in front of a large house built of mud bricks. Unlike the thatched roofs of all the houses round about, its roof was of corrugated iron and it extended out over the platform, making a porch or veranda, on which four or five chairs were arranged. As I went to greet the chief he invited me to sit down on the chair in the middle, which I duly did. A woman was ushered forward, holding a calabash full of palm wine and a slightly greasy-looking glass. I took a sip of the palm wine, which was cool and refreshing, and wondered what the hell to do next.

Fortunately, the man I had taken for the chief was accustomed to taking charge. He was a tall, distinguished-looking figure with short grey hair and a five-day beard, dressed in a wonderful saffron-coloured embroidered robe and a colourful flat-topped hat. His name, he told me, with a friendly smile that revealed truly awful teeth, was Bala, but he also had an official title that sounded

like Ndi Forva. Partly in pidgin, partly through Stephen, he explained to me that he was chief deputy to the Fon of Bum, and was here to welcome me on the Fon's behalf. Thereupon he gave a sort of half bow and clapped his hands several times, so I got up and bowed and clapped back. Bala then brought forward a number of other dignitaries, including the chief, or quarter-head, of the village. These gentlemen also bowed and clapped, but I thought it would be difficult to keep leaping up and down, bowing and clapping, so I stayed where I was and shook hands with everyone who seemed to want to do so.

Stephen sidled up and asked if we could hold the meeting about the plebiscite straight away, as many of the people had been waiting for a long time. I looked around. On my right was Bala, with the village headman at his side. On my left was Stephen, and another of the local notables whose name I have forgotten. In front of us, what looked like the entire male population was standing in a solid phalanx in the sun, and around the edge of this mass of mankind—there must have been a couple of hundred of them—at least the same number of women were squatting in the dust. Behind them, on roof tops and on the raised platforms in front of the houses, were the children. They were all gazing expectantly in my direction. I did not feel at all adequate to the occasion, but I could not possibly let them wait any longer. So yes, I said, let's begin.

Bala opened the proceedings, speaking in the local vernacular and pausing from time to time. Stephen did his best to translate and the gist of the speech was clear enough. The white man had come from another country called England or the United Nations—the two were somehow conflated—to tell everyone about the arrangements for independence. As everyone knew, in a few months' time the white men would be going away and leaving them whether they liked it or not. He, Ndi Forva, did not want independence, but there was nothing he could do about it; he was an old man, and no one listened to him any more. At independence, the men from the cities, from Nigeria or Frenchy side—he meant the brand new République du Cameroun—would come and eat the bush people like themselves. (I was not entirely sure whether the eating was to be taken literally or figuratively, but it was obviously alarming, either way.) The only thing that they, the people, could do was to decide which side was going to eat them up, Nigeria or Cameroun. The white man was going to tell them which to choose.

I was appalled. My instructions specifically forbade me to enter into any discussion at all about the political consequences of the plebiscite and I was completely at a loss what to say. However, after a few further reflections on the undesirability of independence, at least on the terms offered, Bala nodded and smiled at me and generally indicated that it was my turn to speak. I did my best, speaking slowly, and allowing Stephen plenty of time to translate. I spelled out again what they evidently already knew—the decision of the United Nations General Assembly that the Southern Cameroons was going to become

independent by joining either with Nigeria or the République, and it was up to them to vote for union with one or the other. I explained the process of registering of the names of every man and woman over the age of 21, the publication of the register and the opportunity that would then be given to object to anyone who had misrepresented themselves as citizens of the territory. I went into some detail about the polling process and the secret ballot, and made some uplifting observations about democracy in action. I then made it clear that I was not in a position to advise them on which way they should vote, only to make sure that the voting process was as fair and accurate as possible.

Of course I had no way of knowing whether Stephen was translating all this stuff accurately or not, but I could tell, long before I had finished, that my speech was not going down at all well. People shuffled and muttered. Some of them even got up and went over to have a few whispered words with a neighbour. Eventually, my carefully prepared address, all strictly according to the book, fizzled out. Then it was question time. A powerful-looking middle-aged man spoke from the crowd. Stephen translated. I cannot render the exchanges that followed in the precise words that were used at the time, but I remember the substance of what was said.

“Why are you white men going away and leaving us to be eaten up?”

There was nothing in the script for this one. I had to improvise, and the more I improvised the less certain I was of the truth of what I was saying. However, the little speech I made was one I was going to have to repeat many times in the weeks ahead.

“The white men are going away because they were only looking after your country until you were ready for independence. Now you are ready, so the white men are leaving. But you will not be eaten up. There will be more elections after the plebiscite. You will choose your own rulers from the politicians who come here and ask for your votes. If you do not like them, or they do not serve you well, you will be able to dismiss them and choose others.”

All this was way beyond my brief and probably beyond Stephen’s powers of translation. He took a long time over it and I could see that the audience was growing restive.

“These politicians,” said one man speaking for many. “They will come from Frenchy side or they will come from Nigeria. The Nigeria people are cannibals, and the Frenchy people are robbers. How can we choose between two bad people?”

If I had been prepared by the recent machinations of democracy in Iraq I might have anticipated this. But it had not occurred to me until then that the plebiscite, trumpeted by the United Nations as an exercise in democracy, only offered the people the choice—at least as far as some of them saw it - between frying pan and fire. I learned later that over the previous two years efforts had been made, by some local politicians, to persuade the UN that the people of the Southern Cameroons would be happier if they could have their own country,

however small and impoverished it might be, rather than being forced into a shotgun marriage with either of their larger neighbours, but the UN in its collective wisdom had decided that this was not an option. At the time, Nkrumah's wildly unrealistic vision of a united Africa was fashionable and UN delegates, especially those of the so-called 'Casablanca' group of African nations, were fiercely opposed to what they called 'Balkanisation'. This might have been fine for them, rubbing out lines on the map in New York, but here was I in a territory threatened with extinction. What on earth could I say to people who wanted their own country, however insignificant it might be?

"It is not true that the Nigerians are cannibals, nor are the Frenchy people robbers. Anyway, you will have your own politicians from your own people. You will choose one of your own people to rule you."

Apart from putting right the slander against the Nigerians, this reply was no more than wishful thinking on my part. I already knew that Nigerians, especially the energetic Ibo traders, were widely disliked. I also knew that there had been recent violent disturbances among the Bamileke people on 'Frenchy side'. Although there were complex affiliations between one highland clan and another, which ignored the modern border with the République, there was also a long history of warfare, dating back to pre-colonial days. From the point of view of the people of Bum, the people in neighbouring districts, let alone neighbouring countries, were foreigners with unspeakably bad habits, and they had a justifiable suspicion that the politicians would not really be from their own district, and, even if they were, they had no illusions that the highest standards of democracy would endure beyond independence. So my reply was far from reassuring.

The next question, like the others, was destined to be repeated time and again over the ensuing months, even though it was not really a question at all.

"You are a white man," said the speaker. "You are like a father to us people. Tell us which way we should vote."

"I cannot tell you what you should do", I began, then, realising that this reply was inadequate, I drew on the metaphor the questioner himself was using. It was only later that it dawned on me that it was one of the metaphors that had always been used to justify colonialism in the first place.

"When a child is small," I explained, sounding faintly like St Paul talking down to the Corinthians, "he expects his father to make decisions for him, because he does not know any better. When he grows up and becomes a man he expects to make decisions for himself. Independence is like growing up. You are all now grown men and women and you must make this decision for yourselves."

There were more questions, more replies, but they were all repetitions or reformulations of the same point. It was plain that the people of Fonfukka were unhappy. They did not want independence if it meant merging with either of their more powerful neighbours. Many of them wanted the white man to stay, at

least for the time being, and were hurt and angry to think that the British were going to abandon them. I cannot ignore the possibility that some of the audience were more politically astute than I gave them credit for, and might have been trying to draw me into making biased remarks by playing up to my supposed prejudices, but that was not the feeling I had at the time. I began to feel more and more depressed. I had heard sentiments such as these before, but always from the mouths of white racists, who maintained, for their own reasons, that Africans were not 'ready' for independence and were bound to make a mess of running their own affairs. I had always been fiercely opposed to this argument, saying that however big a mess they might make, it would at least be a mess of their own making. Only through independence would they acquire the skills and experience necessary for enlightened self-government. Now, for the first time, I began to wonder if the racists had been right, not because Africans were incapable of taking responsibility for their own affairs, but because they had been thrown headlong into this situation without adequate preparation for it.

The meeting over, everyone drifted away and I was left to my own reflections in the headman's house. I realised, somewhat to my embarrassment, that he had vacated it to make room for me. Pius had set up shop in an adjacent hut and was busy preparing my lunch. However, I was not left alone for long. I heard a sudden commotion in the fields at the edge of the village and I went out to see what was going on. People were running this way and that, pursued by a dog that was behaving in an extraordinary manner, running in circles with its head lolling to one side. I think I knew when I first saw it that the dog was mad. One of my carriers had come to the same conclusion and had run to fetch his spear. Before he could reach it, the dog ran up to a woman with a basket on her head and seized her left hand as she reached out to fend it off. Moments later the carrier had speared the dog and cut its head off, but the damage was already done. By the time I reached her, the woman was weeping with pain and fear, and nursing her mangled hand.

Everyone was looking at me. It was quite clear they assumed I was the medical expert and that it was up to me to administer first aid, but of course I had very little idea what to do. I hurried the weeping woman back to the headman's house, called to Pius to bring some hot water, and dug out the little handbook on health in tropical countries that we had been given on arrival in the country. The book warned that rabies was highly contagious and that even the spittle of a rabid dog on bare skin was dangerous, let alone a bad bite, and this woman's hand was stripped to the bone. The disease was assumed to be fatal without prompt medical attention; the standard treatment in those days was a course of 36 abdominal injections that had to be administered in hospital, and the nearest hospital was at Bamenda, at least three days' march away. However, I thought that the first thing to do was to wash the wound with disinfectant as

swiftly and thoroughly as possible, and apply a sterile dressing against secondary infection.

It is perhaps a reflection on the priorities of the colonial service in those days that we had been equipped with loads of cumbersome gear to ensure our comfort, but that no one had thought to give us a crash course in first aid, let alone an emergency medical kit. I did the best I could, tearing up one of my clean shirts and bathing the woman's mangled hand in freshly boiled water. The wound was very bad. The skin fell away from her palm in loose flaps, and some of the flesh had been stripped from the bones of her thumb and forefinger. With remarkable courage, and far too much confidence in my abilities as a doctor, she allowed me to clean the wound and dry it with scraps of shirt material. I did not have any proper disinfectant, but there was a liquid called Milton, usually used to soak terry towel nappies, that was included in the cook box for washing fruit and vegetables. I applied a temporary tourniquet to reduce the bleeding, disinfected the mangled hand as best I could, bound the flaps of skin back together with improvised bandages, and made a rough sling out of the rest of my shirt.

By the time I had finished, the woman was far calmer than I was, but then she held out her good hand as though expecting something more, and I realised that she was expecting me to give her a pill of some kind. All I had, apart from anti-malarial tablets, was a bottle of aspirin. I gave her one and she seemed satisfied, but of course I was not satisfied at all. I was afraid that without proper medical attention, even if the wound did not become infected, she would eventually die a very unpleasant death from rabies. I got Stephen to explain to the woman's husband that she must go down to Bamenda without delay, and that otherwise she might die. The man shrugged his shoulders. She was only his number two wife, he told Stephen, and anyway the white man had made her better.

There was nothing more I could do, except to make loud disclaimers of any medical skill and urge the man to take her to hospital. He did not look convinced, but he did not refuse outright, so I made a mental note to call on the woman to see how she was doing when I returned to Fonfukka later in the year. This incident did nothing to improve my frame of mind. The combination of my experience at the plebiscite meeting and my clumsy attempts to patch up the woman's hand left me feeling fraudulent and curiously helpless, in the grip of circumstances completely out of my control. Which of course I was.

I did not stay miserable for long. Towards evening I heard the drums going again. The women were going to put on a dance. I sat in solitary state on the veranda and watched. There were several different kinds of drum. One was simply a large log, with a deep trench hollowed out of its centre, resting horizontally on the ground. The drummer used two heavy club-like sticks to sound it, and he could alter the pitch and timbre of each note by striking the log at different points along its length. It was drums of this kind that I had heard

that same morning, talking to each other from hill to hill, calling on all the people to come to the town for the meeting. The other drums were much smaller. One stood vertically, allowing the drummer to beat it with both hands. Others were shaped rather like an egg timer, with skins stretched across both ends and held tightly together by leather thongs that stretched the entire length of the drum. By claspings the instrument under one arm and beating it with his free hand the drummer could vary the pitch by increasing or relaxing the pressure on these thongs. As they played, I realised that some of these men—they were all men - were real virtuosos. The sounds they produced and the rhythms they set up were subtle and insistent, demanding that everyone who heard them should dance.

But this dance was only for the women. There was no age limit. Some of them were grannies, others mere children, but they all moved with the same fluid grace, their feet shuffling flat-footed in a wide circle, their bodies swaying and undulating in time to the drums. A few were wrapped about in brightly printed cotton cloth of the kind I had seen on sale in the market. Others had no more than a faded rag around their waists, and all of them went barefoot. Every now and then one woman would break free of the circle and perform a little extempore solo in the middle of the ring, while the others urged her on, laughing and clapping to encourage her. As I watched them I could not fail to be impressed by how happy they seemed to be, despite their evident poverty and despite all the gloom that had recently been aired at the meeting, and I began to cheer up. I was pleased to think that these women, for the first time in their lives, were going to have a vote in a free democratic process. Over the course of time, perhaps, their new-found political clout would enable them to have a greater say in other aspects of their lives. Somewhat reassured by this thought I eventually withdrew and left them to it.

It was my first night away from the relative comforts of the house in Wum and it took me a little while to get used to the new surroundings. The headman's house with its mud brick walls and iron roof was at the cutting edge of modernity in local terms, but, like all African houses, it was filled with the all-pervasive smell of wood smoke. The beams overhead were shiny with a glossy deposit of soot from the cooking fires that normally burned, day and night, in a small hearth in the middle of the room. When the smoke is fresh it has one odour, but when the fire itself has died it has another, reminiscent of kippers or smoked ham. It is not unpleasant, but it takes some time to become accustomed to it. The drums were still going outside and the narrow camp bed was unfamiliar and I lay awake for a long time, turning over all the events of the day in my mind. I was beginning to realise that the Public Enlightenment Campaign was not simply a matter of the white man bringing the gospel of democracy to an unenlightened people; it was also a matter of the people dispelling some of the white man's own illusions. Enlightenment could cut both ways.

Early the following morning, Bala came to the house to take me on a guided tour of the village before we set off to see the Fon. He was an excellent guide. Although he had great authority, and all the orders he gave were instantly obeyed, he also had a strong sense of humour and he was not in the least overawed by having a white man as his guest. Using Stephen as an intermediary, he questioned me closely about my background. He wanted to know what kind of house I had in England, how many wives, how many children, and when I had to admit that I had none of these necessary adjuncts to manhood he managed to make me feel, though he was far too polite to say so, that I was not much more than a child myself.

Under his guidance I looked closely at the village houses and the gardens around them. The houses were perched on raised platforms of granite boulders, and were simply but beautifully built from the stems of the raffia palm. They were square in plan and elevation, with steep pyramid-shaped roofs, and deep, overhanging eaves. The walls were made out of tightly interlaced raffia, overlaid with a smooth plaster of reddish clay, and the roofs were thickly thatched with long fine grass. The houses were weatherproof, cool in the heat of the day and surprisingly commodious inside, with beds, shelves and benches all skilfully contrived from raffia stems. Not surprisingly, it was these same palms that made up most of the vegetation between the houses, but there were also banana groves and paw-paw trees, with their huge yellow-green fruit tightly clustered around a small tuft of leaves at the top. In between the trees were plots of vegetables, including squashes of different shapes and sizes, bright red peppers, small green aubergines and coco-yams, with huge, arrow-shaped leaves. Chickens, pigs and goats wandered about between the houses.

Although it was still early in the morning, the women had already gone out to work in the fields, and most of the people around were children, or women too old and frail to work. Bala told me that it was often the task of the old women to cook and clean and keep an eye on the children, but in fact the children seemed to do a very good job of looking after themselves. Many of the older girls were already on their way home from the stream, with shiny kerosene cans or earthenware pots full of water on their heads. Others, usually boys, were carrying stacks of firewood, and many of them had smaller children tagging along behind them. If they were not carrying anything else, the girls, even a few of the boys, often had a baby attached to their hips, wrapped tightly into the waistband of the cloth around the older child's waist. I was immensely impressed by how kind the children seemed to be to one another, with the older kids looking after the younger ones. It was not all sweetness and light, of course, but it was a lot sweeter and lighter than most bunches of children I had ever seen anywhere else.

There were not many men about, and the few that there were seemed already to have started their long hard day of sitting around and gossiping in the shade, but one or two were at work. One man was weaving, sitting cross-legged

on the ground with a small hand loom across his knees. The warp threads were attached to a large stone, and as he plied his shuttle across the warp, opening and closing the shed, he gradually drew the stone closer to him, rolling up a narrow strip of cloth into a tight coil on his lap. Not far away another man was hafting an iron hoe, using a small adze to chip tiny slivers of wood from a tough branch until it was smooth enough to make a comfortable handle. I did not see him on this occasion, but I later discovered a local blacksmith, who might well have made the hoe blade.

It seemed to me, as I watched all this more or less leisurely activity, that Fonfukka, with its obvious poverty and total lack of social security or health services, was certainly no paradise on earth, but it was a marvel of self-sufficiency. The climate was generally benign. There was no shortage of food or clean water, though obtaining either obviously demanded considerable effort. The people made their own tools, built their own houses, fashioned their own clothes and even managed their own entertainment. The few things they could not grow or make for themselves they could trade for in the local markets against the income received for their own surplus produce. As far as I could see, apart from the fact that the women evidently did most of the work, there was no great oppression or fear abroad, apart from the fear that I brought with me - the prospect of independence and the merging of the country with one of its larger neighbours. And this made me wonder what possible good was going to be served by thrusting the people into the modern world, and pushing them into a democratic exercise that offered them no real choice at all. I put an edited version of these thoughts to Bala, and he grinned at me with his bad teeth.

“We have everything we need, but we do not have everything we want, and that is why there is no escape from the modern world.”

This utterance was more Delphic than it seemed. As time went by I was going to see that the people felt deprived and impoverished in more ways than I realised, but in those first few days on trek I was still caught up in the wonder and surprise of everything around me. When I returned to the headman’s house I found the carriers preparing for the next journey, and we set off, full of anticipation, up the steep trail to the Fon’s palace at Laager Bum.

The way upwards was steep, more like a long-decayed staircase than a path, and it twisted and turned between huge boulders as we neared the top. Later, when climbing that same path on horseback, I came across a snake in an overhanging tree that was nearly the death of both me and the horse, but that first time the journey was uneventful. I puffed and grunted my way up the hill, pausing frequently to get my breath and admire the scenery stretched out below me. We were still in the rainy season. It was dry and sunny in the morning, but the rain came, with predictable regularity, at about two o’clock in the afternoon. The land below me was hazy in a mist that was not apparent at close quarters, but seemed to deepen the further one was removed from it. I could just make out the little square houses and a few faint threads of smoke from the village

below, but beyond it was nothing but a hazy impression of hills and valleys, stretching green and mysterious to the far horizon.

When we finally reached the top of the hill I realised immediately that the Fon's headquarters was sited in a strong defensive position. The rocky hillside ran up steeply on all sides to a small plateau, where a miniature citadel had been established. It was marked on the map as Lagha Bum, and I thought immediately of the German word '*laager*', meaning camp, or military fortification. Was this perhaps where the Germans had once sited their own district headquarters some sixty years before? Bala did not know. All he could tell me was that a long low building, fashioned from mud brick and raised on a stone platform, was the Fon's old palace. As palaces go it was not impressive. It looked more like a terraced row of mud huts than a stately home, but rising behind and beyond it was a larger building, more or less square in plan, with a shiny corrugated iron roof. This, apparently, was the new palace, where the Fon was holding court and awaiting my arrival. The carriers set down their loads and I waited outside while Bala went ahead to see if the Fon was ready to receive me. After a few moments he came to the doorway and beckoned me forward.

I entered what was really no more than a large shed, with mud brick walls and a metal roof, but it was packed with people and the heat was stifling. Against the far wall was a raised dais and in the centre was the Fon, seated on his wooden throne, enveloped in colourful floor-length robes, and holding an elaborate beaded fly whisk in his right hand as though it was a sceptre. Beside him was a large calabash entirely covered in intricate patterns of beads and stoppered with a bunch of leaves that I now know to have been dracaena—a tropical foliage plant beloved by English flower arrangers and Cameroonian magicians. It was obvious that both the beaded calabash and the fly whisk were symbols of regal authority. The Fon did not look towards me as I entered because his attention was focused on a group of women immediately in front of me. They were bowing their heads and clapping; then they raised their hands, palms together, to their mouths, and blew noisily through their closed palms, as though they were trying to imitate the chuffing of a train to a small child.

I imagined that the women were doing a demonstration for my benefit, so as soon as they had found somewhere to sit down I went forward myself, bowed, clapped, and made chuff chuff noises through my closed palms. There was a slight hush in the room as I did this, but the Fon smiled kindly at me, gently nodded his head, and indicated an empty chair on his right. I took the offered chair and sat watching while more and more people came bowing and clapping into the room until it was packed to the point of suffocation. I recognised several people who had been in Fonfukka the day before, and I could not believe that they had made the long climb up to Lagha Bum just to hear me make the same speech all over again. Despite the arduous journey they were all dressed in their best clothes and this was obviously a three-line whip.

The Fon was making a point, putting on a show to demonstrate his power and authority.

All the same, I still had to go through the business and, at the Fon's invitation, I made much the same speech as I had made the day before. Bala gave his introductory harangue, a little more briefly than before. When I spoke, Stephen again translated. Apart from the stifling heat, the main difference between the two occasions was that everyone in the Fon's presence appeared to pay very close attention to what I said, but nobody asked any questions. Either they already knew the answers or they did not wish to appear too interested in democracy in these traditional surroundings. When it was clear that the meeting was over, the Fon rose to his feet, smiled graciously at me, and made his exit, while the rest of us waited in respectful silence.

Bala offered to show me to my quarters, which turned out to be one of the terraced apartments in the Fon's old palace. I was surprised to find quite a large room, scrupulously clean, and provided, most unusually, with a primitive screened-off shower and a bucket lavatory. Pius had already set up my bed, chair and table, and had taken up residence next door.

I was about to take off my sweaty clothes and try out the shower when Bala came back into my room, together with Stephen the interpreter. Both of them were grinning all over their faces and Bala went through a little charade for my benefit. First he bowed before me and clapped his hands. Then he raised his hands to his face, blew through the closed palms and made the chuff chuff noises I had made to the Fon, but before he had properly finished he collapsed with mirth. So too did Stephen. Then Pius popped his head round the door so that he too could have a good laugh. In between snorts and splutters they managed to explain to me, without actually saying so, that I had made a complete ass of myself. Apparently, the group of women in front of me in the palace, whose form of greeting I had followed, were all married to the Fon. While bowing and clapping were normal forms of greeting to a social superior, the chuff chuff routine was the traditional greeting of the Fon's wives. Effectively, I had been claiming the same status as these privileged ladies and I could hardly have made myself look more ridiculous. What I should have done, as an important visiting official, was to go straight up to the Fon and shake him by the hand.

I felt mildly embarrassed, but there was nothing I could do about it except to try and avoid similar solecisms in the future. However, I was intrigued to hear about the Fon's wives.

"Were all those women in the room his wives?" I asked. "There must have been dozens of them."

Apparently not. Bala explained, with occasional help from Stephen, that the only women we had seen who were actually married to the Fon were the six or so members of the same small party who had prompted my faux pas, but there were also a number of concubines who had been in the audience. The Fon's

other wives were working on their farms and had not come to Lagha Bum on this particular morning, but another delegation would come in a couple of days' time. It seemed to be a rota system. Every time they paid a visit they brought as much food as they could carry from their farms and it was this produce that fed the Fon and his immediate entourage. Bala seemed to think that the Fon had at least a hundred wives, but I think this was an over-estimate. As far as I could work it out, each group of six or so women made the journey up to Lagha Bum once every two weeks. Assuming a two-day interval between delegations that meant that there were forty or so all told. Exactly how the conjugal arrangements worked I never discovered. Suffice it to say that the Fon and his wives would retire to his private rooms for a few hours every time they brought food to his palace.

Later that day Bala introduced me to a party of the Fon's children, gathered on a porch with their teacher. I counted 17 little boys and girls, but it seemed that some of the older children were in another class, and all those below school age were still on the farms with their mothers. So no one seemed to know exactly how many children there were, but Bala's guess was somewhere between forty and fifty. My respect for the Fon was increasing by the hour. For the first time it began to dawn on me that accumulating large numbers of wives and children was more than just an exercise in male vanity. Numerous children might mean rival claimants to power at some point in the future, but they also ensured a substantial number of people with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Properly managed, they could provide a solid political power base. In this case, the numerous wives were also of immediate economic value. Quite literally, they sustained the Fon, his family and his court.

Later that afternoon the great man himself paid me a visit. To my surprise he was no longer enveloped in his traditional robes, but casually dressed in dark grey trousers and a shining white shirt. He shook my hand as I rose to meet him.

"John Yai", he said. "Another John", and smiled warmly.

John Yai was about thirty-five, short in stature but powerfully built, with a formidable belly that did credit to the farmers in the family. He was highly intelligent, well informed, and keen to talk about the plebiscite. He was also very frank about his views. To him, as increasingly to me, the plebiscite was a fraudulent exercise. Whether the people voted for Nigeria or the République was to some extent irrelevant; either way this small patch of Africa would lose what fragile identity it had and become a minor province of a much larger country. He himself favoured Nigeria because he spoke English, as did a number of his subjects, and he felt that the Anglophone culture would be more congenial to everyone, but whatever happened he was sure that traditional rulers like himself were bound to be sidelined in the future and that the real power would be in the hands of the politicians.

"So why not become a politician yourself?" I asked.

“Of course I am a politician” he replied, and he explained that, under the interim constitution devised by the British, the Government included both a House of Representatives and a House of Chiefs, rather like the Commons and the Lords. The Fon had a seat in the House of Chiefs, but going into politics full time meant staying for long periods of time in the capital, Buea, and immersing himself in its cabals and intrigues. For the moment, he preferred to stay where he was and do his best to protect his people from the unrest that he thought would be inevitable following independence.

Privately, I wondered whether he also wanted to make sure that his subjects followed his own choice when it came to polling day for the plebiscite. I myself was still wedded to the ideals of democracy. I saw the disadvantages of submitting to the popular vote from the point of view of a traditional ruler, but I could not help feeling that enabling people to take decisions for themselves was a step forward for the country. The whole of Africa would one day be democratic, I insisted, and that had to be good for the whole continent.

“You really think that Africa will be democratic?” he asked gently. “After ten thousand years of chiefly rule and less than a century of colonialism? Was that a good foundation for democracy?”

Of course I had to acknowledge that it was not. A parsimonious British administration had chosen to run the Southern Cameroons as part of eastern Nigeria, using existing traditional rulers to run local government, but reserving real power in the hands of a very small number of British and Nigerian officials. Only in very recent years had the colonial authorities begun to permit the development of political parties and democratic institutions.

In John Yai’s view, colonialism in itself was neither good nor bad. Colonial rule may have involved oppression and exploitation, but it had also brought about development in terms of the economy and the infrastructure of the country. The real problem, as he saw it, was that colonialism had not gone far enough. He could see that I was uncomfortable with this idea, so he went on to explain what he meant. He pointed to India, where British traders and entrepreneurs had developed trade in raw materials and local manufactures over four centuries, and had then gone on to invest in industrial development, undercutting their own domestic industries by promoting Indian textiles, ship-building, even steel mills, long before independence. Eventually the British had also encouraged—admittedly after many years of autocratic rule - the development of democratic institutions and a reasonably free press. They had created a vast and efficient civil service, a nationwide infrastructure of roads and railways and an effective educational system, at least for a minority of the population. This had taken four hundred years to accomplish in India, whereas the Southern Cameroons had only been colonised for a single lifetime.

“So you see why many of the people want you to stay for a while,” he said. “They want you to help us build all these things before you go. Look,” he said, holding up a box of matches. “We cannot even make one of these.”

In terms of development, the lack of a match factory was hardly the biggest problem for the Southern Cameroons. In 1960 there were no proper roads, no passenger railways, precious few schools and only a handful of medical facilities. The vast majority of the people still lived, as I had seen for myself in Fonfukka, a life of rural self-sufficiency, just as their ancestors had done for countless generations, but unlike their ancestors they had glimpsed the future and wanted to be part of it.

So I could not accept everything the Fon said. Scholars still debate the extent of African civilisation before the terrible disruptions of the slave trade. But there can be no doubt that India had an ancient civilisation of great refinement and complexity many centuries before the colonial era had even begun. It is questionable whether British rule helped or hindered India's development as a modern nation state. However, the Fon was undoubtedly right to point out how little the British had done to develop the economy or the infrastructure of his own country.

We parted on good terms. The Fon asked Bala to accompany me on my tour of his kingdom and promised to give me his support if I met any problems. I spent the following five days making a circuit of the principal towns and villages of Bum, stopping for the night at each place, and making my little speech before moving on. The scenery was beautiful, the villages picturesque. If not exactly prosperous, almost everyone looked happy and well fed, and the only thing that seemed to upset them was the news of the impending merger with one of their two larger neighbours, that I carried with me, like an infection. I now saw myself and my fellow PSOs as part of the problem for the future of the country rather than part of the solution. It was a much more thoughtful and questioning young Plebiscite Officer who eventually met up with his Land Rover and made the journey back to Wum.

3. aghem

On returning to Wum I made my report to the Plebiscite Administrator. Tal was not surprised that politics had come up at my meetings, and took a relaxed view of the kind of questions I had been asked. He did not think it strange that many people were opposed to independence if that meant merging with one or other of their larger neighbours, nor was he surprised that the Fon favoured the Nigerian alternative, but his attitude was one of cheerful detachment. Never mind if you can't answer the questions, he said. Just stick to the script. It was not our business to reason why, only to get on with the job as dispassionately and efficiently as we could.

I had already made plans for a series of meetings in Wum town and the surrounding district of Aghem. The people in the town itself were relatively sophisticated, because of their close contacts with Bamenda, only about three hours' truck journey to the south, and there was a greater awareness of party politics in the area than there had been in Bum. I had done my best to mug up on these by talking to the District Officer and reading the papers that we could sometimes buy in the market place.

At the time, the Prime Minister was John Foncha, of the Kamerun National Democratic Party. The KNDP's policy was for 're-unification' with the former French colony. In fact the Cameroons, like most other African countries, was defined by lines drawn on the map by the colonial powers in the late 19th century and had only ever been united as the German colony of Kamerun, but during the campaign for independence, a number of local politicians had found it useful to look back on the period of German occupation as a golden age of national unity. Mr Foncha did just that. As it happened, he had been born and raised in the grasslands and he had a strong local following. He also capitalised on the widespread dislike of the Ibos, lively and acquisitive traders from Nigeria, who tended to monopolise the best jobs, both in business and in the civil service. It was not difficult to arouse popular fears of being swamped by Nigerians.

Dr Endeley, Mr Foncha's rival for power and leader of the opposition party, the CPNC, naturally took the opposite tack. Even though he had at one time favoured union with Cameroun, Dr Endeley now emphasised the level of political unrest in the newly independent République. The French-trained gendarmerie had brutally suppressed a series of bloody uprisings, and for Southern Cameroonians, accustomed to a relatively mild British administration, the prospect of riot, rebellion and savage military reprisals was alarming. Endeley also gained support on the 'devil you know' principle. The territory had been administered as part of Nigeria for nearly fifty years and the sky had not fallen in. With full provincial status in an enlarged federation, argued Endeley,

the Southern Cameroons would enjoy the benefits of independence under the wing of its powerful neighbour.

In practice the question of which way to vote boiled down to this. Which country are you more frightened of, Nigeria or Cameroun? And it was this question that formed the sub-text of most of the points that were put to me during the plebiscite meetings in Wum.

My interpreter in Wum was Samuel Kum, whose understanding of local politics and of the English language was far in advance of Stephen's. Samuel was able to interpret both what was being said, and the undertow of what was not actually being said but was generally understood by everyone else but me. I would make a rather tedious and anodyne speech about the procedure for the plebiscite. When the question of which country to choose came up I would simply say "that's up to you". Then, to my surprise, a man might stand up in the audience and shout angrily in my direction. Samuel would translate this as "Why are you coming here to tell us lies?" I would look baffled and hesitant, and Samuel would add, in a lower voice, "This man is KNDP. He thinks you are really in favour of Nigeria, but you are pretending not to be, and you are going to steal the votes and make them come out the way you want."

Of course I would do my best to stay poker-faced and assure everyone that I was merely passing on the words of the United Nations, that I had no wish to influence the outcome of the plebiscite either way, but I could not avoid coming under suspicion of being a closet partisan. After all, I was British. It stood to reason that I must be in favour of Nigeria, because it had recently been a British colony. (Nigeria had achieved independence earlier that same year, 1960.) In the eyes of many in the audience, it was not possible that I could be as objective as I pretended to be and it followed that I was a liar and would use whatever means I could to influence the result of the plebiscite.

From that time onwards I was aware that there were some sections of the local population who did not wish me well, and might even try and undermine my work, but I had no idea what form this harassment might take until I came across the Nkoh. Or perhaps I should say, the Nkoh came looking for me.

I had just finished a meeting in one of the outlying villages and was walking back to Wum along a bush path. Behind me was a small group of helpers, including Samuel and a couple of other young men. Quite suddenly, an extraordinary prancing figure came galloping down the track towards me. It was a man with no face. His entire head was hidden in a featureless black mask of buffalo hide. Above the faceless mask was the grinning skeleton of a monkey and around his wrists and ankles were bone bracelets that rattled as he danced. His muscular chest and limbs were finely coated with a mixture of clay and wood ash, so that he appeared to be white all over, and around his waist was a leopard skin, held in place by a thick grass rope, with two strong men hanging on to the end of it. A drummer lurked a short distance behind him, keeping up a wild, staccato rhythm. Another man, close behind the dancer, lashed his head

and shoulders with a bunch of dracaena leaves, which drove him into extravagant bouts of leaping and posturing, but the most astonishing thing about him was his sheer power. The two men hanging on to the rope were being dragged all over the place as if they were straw puppets.

I stood as still as a tree, perhaps letting my twigs tremble a bit, but refusing to budge from the path. I felt that this character was trying to intimidate me and it made me angry—all the more so because he was so close to succeeding. He danced up to me, around me, to one side, then to the other, shaking his bone bracelets close to my body, and finally ended up, inches from my face, staring straight at me. I could just make out his eyes through narrow slits in the black mask. He carried no weapon, but he was big, and extremely strong. There was no mistaking the menace of his stare.

Then, equally suddenly, he was gone, prancing back along the path the way he had come, with his minders hanging on to his rope as though he was a runaway bull. I looked around for Samuel and his friends, but they were nowhere to be seen. Eventually I tracked them down, deep in the bush, a long way from the path. Looking slightly embarrassed, but thoroughly shaken, Samuel explained.

The man in the mask was known as Nkoh, which rhymed with cough, and he and his hangers on were all members of a powerful secret society known collectively by the same name. I already knew that there were several such societies among the local people, each with their own masks and costumes. These would be brought out on special occasions and used for ritual dances or masquerades, which were often of great symbolic importance and always provided a lot of excitement, sometimes a frisson of fear. All the masks and ceremonies were often referred to in pidgin as ‘juju’, which could mean almost anything to do with magic or medicine, much of which was thought to be fairly benign. But the Nkoh was different. The Nkoh was *bad* juju.

I had already heard a lot about bad juju. Everyone in the Cameroons seemed to believe as a matter of course that there were witches, both men and women, whose spirits left their bodies, usually at night, and went out in the darkness to harm others. If an adult or a child was ill, or even if someone had a bad dream, it would often be put down to witchcraft. There were also sorcerers, who were different from witches because they used medicine—usually concocted from plants and the more disagreeable parts of dead animals—to put a spell on someone. One especially malignant form of sorcery involved stealing discarded bits and pieces from the victim’s body—a few strands of hair perhaps, or fingernail parings—and then using this human detritus to make bad medicine. At best the afflicted person would fall sick. At worst he would die.

If I confess now that I had felt apprehensive when the big man towered over me, it was more on account of his size and strength than his fancy dress. Thanks to a sceptical upbringing, I did not believe in magic, but neither did I under-estimate the effect it could have on someone who did. Samuel and his

friends clearly believed in the Nkoh, and, with some difficulty, I persuaded them to explain what it was all about.

Apparently, the Nkoh society was a kind of club, made up of some of the most powerful men in the local community. If a person had something they wanted, or had behaved in a way that offended them, the society would target him or her for a visit from the man in the mask. They primed the dancer first with secret medicine and magical incantations, which gave him enormous strength and sent him into a kind of frenzy. Once he was in this state, if he touched any human being - man, woman or child - that person would from that moment be rendered sterile. A woman would not be able to bear a child; a man could not beget one. The only remedy for this fearful disability lay in the hands of the Nkoh society, and to obtain it the unhappy victim would have to acquiesce to their wishes, or pay a fine. Sometimes this was no more than a few chickens or a goat. Sometimes it was a house, or a valuable piece of land. There was no escape, because if a prospective victim heard that the Nkoh was on the rampage and went away to hide, the masked man and his accomplices might well destroy everything he possessed. They might even torch his house.

"How would someone know he was likely to become a victim?" I wanted to know.

Samuel looked evasive, and had to be coaxed into spelling it out.

"The Nkoh gives a warning first," he said.

"Are you saying that was a warning to me?"

Samuel said nothing, but his look left me in no doubt.

It works rather like a protection racket, I thought. If the Nkoh threatens me I am supposed to pay up, or do whatever he wants. If I fail to comply I will either face instant sterilisation or have my house reduced to ruins. There could only be one thing that this secret society could possibly want from me, and that was for me to stop talking about the plebiscite—telling lies about it, from their point of view. Should I talk to the District Officer about it, or the sergeant at the police station? No, I would only look ridiculous. How can you charge someone with threatening behaviour when no explicit threat has been made? Anyway I did not even know who was doing the threatening. The only possible course was to ignore the incident and hope there were no unpleasant consequences. Given the choice, I thought I would take my chances on magical sterilisation rather than the demolition job, but I did not really think it would come to that. What had happened was a crude attempt at intimidation. Nothing more. All the same, I had an uneasy feeling that this was not the last I would hear of the man in the mask.

Fortunately for my peace of mind, there was a general assumption that juju did not work very well on white men. I experienced this in a very minor way around the same time as the encounter with the Nkoh. In the grasslands there is a kind of slow-worm, or legless lizard, that looks like a fat white snake and lives in tunnels under the ground. It has no discernible eyes and not much of a

mouth, but the people in Wum believed that it was possessed of powerful juju. Even to touch it meant instant illness, followed by an agonising death. I found one of these harmless creatures wriggling blindly around the compound, only a few yards away from our house. Knowing nothing of the superstition, I picked it up and went to ask Pius for a box to put it in so that I could observe the way it behaved.

There was consternation in the kitchen when Pius and Lucas saw what I was holding, and once they had backed off to a safe distance they told me very much what I have explained here. I knew it was nonsense and insisted on the box. In fact I kept the creature for a day or two and showed it to some of my visitors, but almost all of them recoiled with genuine terror. I tried to demonstrate its harmlessness by tucking it inside my shirt and letting it wriggle out again. "Look," I would say. "It doesn't even have any teeth."

Useless. Of course the blind snake did not harm me, they said. But that did not mean it was harmless, only that I was proof against its magic. In the end I had to take it out into the bush and let it go, or some people would have been afraid even to come to the house.

However, snake or no snake, for quite long periods visitors would have been unlikely to find anyone at home, because Nigel and I were often both out on trek.

The next phase of the Public Enlightenment Campaign took me to a part of the country that I had not as yet explored. Some of the population of the so-called Aghem clan area belonged to a completely different people, ethnically and linguistically distinct from the majority, and they were the Esimbi, whose womenfolk I had already met in the market. The Esimbi are small, sturdy people. The men barely come up to my shoulder and the women are even smaller, though they are blessed with remarkably large behinds. In those days this feature was rendered all the more prominent by the fact that they only wore a wisp of woven grass fibre fore and aft. I know nothing of their history, and at one time they too may have lived in the grasslands, but for many generations they have hidden their villages deep in the forest, as far from their bigger neighbours as possible.

Samuel tried in vain to find an Esimbi guide, but the men never seemed to come to the town. Eventually he tracked down a hunter, who claimed to speak Esimbi and to know their villages well. So we set off early one morning, with the hunter in the lead, followed by a new train of carriers and a full load of equipment, including the tent, because I had been warned that the forest houses were very small and uncomfortable. The carriers from Wum were older men, who scorned to put loads on their heads, saying that only women did that. Instead, each man carried his bundle in a yoke of raffia palm that rested on one shoulder, and he spread the load by supporting the yoke with a stick or a spear over the other. It was an ingenious arrangement, and one that I have never seen anywhere else except in the neighbouring towns of Isu and Weh.

For the first few miles we passed through the fields on the outskirts of Wum. There were patches of maize, interspersed with groves of plantain and banana, plots full of the vast arrow-head leaves of the coco-yam, and others with the delicate fronds of cassava, but all these little fields were scattered through tracts of grassland, stretching many miles beyond the edge of the town. This apparent waste of space was partly due to the system of land allocation, a mystery that I never fathomed, and partly because the land had to lie fallow in between bouts of cultivation. So the women often had to walk for more than an hour before they even reached the fields where they laboured every day. The men gave them no help. They would clear the land when it was necessary to make a new farm, but they never dirtied their hands by actually working the soil. The women did it all.

After about two hours we came to the edge of the forest, where the land fell steeply away from the high grassland plateau, and a stream wound its way downhill through the huge bare stems of the trees. To my surprise, the hunter did not cross the stream, but walked down the middle of it, using the watercourse as a path. I asked Samuel why, and he explained that the Esimbi always covered their tracks by using streams in this way. He said it was in order to avoid the tax collector, and it may have been true, but I somehow felt that these elusive little people had been hiding from others, long before any Europeans set foot in this part of Africa. Anyway, the stream made an excellent path through the forest. The bed was of fine gravel, very different from those I had come across before, and the water threaded its way through the massive trees, slowly undulating downhill. It was like Ariadne's thread, a lifeline through the labyrinth, and this was vital because the forest is totally lacking in landmarks. One tree trunk looks much like another, even if they are all five foot thick. The trunks have no branches until they break out into a great leafy umbrella, sixty or seventy feet above the ground, and the crown of each tree merges with those close to it to make a continuous canopy, so dense and dark that it is permanent twilight beneath, even when the equatorial sun is blazing down at noon on a cloudless day.

On that journey the forest was also curiously silent. Sometimes there was the faint cry of a bird or a monkey, high in the treetops, but most of the time it was so quiet that the only sound we could hear was the splash of our own feet in the shallow stream. Then the inevitable happened. The hunter lost the trail.

To make matters worse he did not actually say he had lost it, but at some point along the stream he must have missed the spot where bare feet had left the water and trodden a path through the forest. Now we had reached a point where the stream suddenly gathered speed and disappeared into a ravine before crashing down a steep cliff in a miniature waterfall. Trying to find a way round this obstacle, we then spent hours threading our way along miniscule tracks, which had an unnerving habit of appearing to go round in circles. The hunter

had to wield a cutlass to clear the way, because although there were no branches to cut through, there were numerous tangled vines that looped down from the trees. He must also have had great difficulty discerning any tracks at all, because the forest floor was covered by a carpet of leathery leaves, constantly replenished by others falling from above. So we wandered blindly around, stumbling downhill in some places, hauling ourselves uphill in others, crossing several streams and getting our clothes wet and muddy, which did nothing to improve anyone's temper.

It was during this rather frustrating journey that I first came across driver ants. These ferocious insects thread their way along the forest floor in long columns, three or four ants abreast. The workers are quite small, not much more than half an inch in length, but marching alongside the workers and guarding their flanks are soldier ants, which are twice the size, with huge jaws. If the foragers ahead of the main line of march come across a good food source, a tree full of nectar-rich flowers for instance, or, though I hate to say it, a tethered goat, the line breaks up and the ants fan out to devour whatever happens to be available. I am glad that I never saw it, but I was told of one incident when a single column of driver ants reduced a full-grown horse to a skeleton in less than an hour. For me, lightly burdened as I was, it was no trouble to watch where I was going and step over the marching columns of ants, but the carriers, burdened as they were, could not always spot the danger and several of them were badly bitten.

For the first time in my experience they began to get exasperated. Even those who had avoided the ants found that the yokes over their shoulders kept snagging on the vines and they had to stop from time to time to cut themselves free. At intervals they called out to our guide, apparently threatening him with dreadful reprisals if he did not find a proper path, and they began to demand rests at more and more frequent intervals. At last, I think more by luck than judgement, we came to a place where light burst through a much thinner canopy of leaves, and the way was choked with luxuriant undergrowth. We had stumbled upon an abandoned farm, where the Esimbi had felled and burned a stand of trees some years before, and cultivated the land until it ceased to bear good crops. Then the farmers had moved on and the forest had begun to reclaim the land. Fortunately, there were still a few clumps of bananas bearing fruit and the Esimbi women evidently came here from time to time to gather the crop. A muddy footpath, with bare footprints that even I could see, led clearly away from the overgrown farm.

We followed the path and after about an hour the view gradually opened up to reveal a beautiful valley where the forest was no longer continuous, but broken up into smaller stands of tall trees, with tracts of much lower growth in between. It was evidently an area where the forest had been cleared and re-cleared at intervals over many generations. We crossed another stream, quite wide and clear, with a fine gravel bed, and surprised a party of children who

were fetching water. Immediately, they dropped their water pots and fled up the path towards the village. I was astonished, because I had never seen children run away like that before. In most Cameroons villages they did the opposite, rushing to have a good look at any stranger who happened to appear. It was obvious that they did not get many visitors at Itiaku, and those they did get were not exactly welcome.

However, despite our guide's shortcomings, the word I had sent some days before via the hunter had reached the headman, who came forward to greet me as the carriers set down their loads with grunts of relief. He was very small and somewhat under-dressed, like all his people, and he was an old man by Cameroons standards. I guessed about 65 or 70.

To my surprise he addressed me half in pidgin and half in German, a language I had not heard since my days in the Army. He made quite a speech, and although I could not make out everything he was saying, he succeeded in conveying several things that astonished me. He said that I was the first white man to visit his district since World War I, some 45 years before, when some soldiers from Nigeria had come this way. Before that, long ago, when he was a small child, there had been a few Germans who had ventured into the forest. But the British District Officer had never come. Nor had any other officials, black or white. The children had run away from me because they had never seen a white man in their lives before. Neither had most of the younger men and women. (I later discovered that the Esimbi girls who came to Wum market were from another village, closer to the road.) He himself had worked for a German official when he was a very young man, but most of his people did not travel and knew very little of the outside world. Now, he was happy that I had come to visit him and eager to hear what I had to say.

We had been seven hours on the way to the village. When I returned to Itiaku a few weeks later, we did not get lost and made the journey in no more than four. So these people lived only a morning's walk from the District Office and yet they had spent the best part of a lifetime under British rule without ever setting eyes on a white man. And now that they were meeting one for the first time, it was in the closing days before Independence and all the political upheavals that went with it. I was astonished, but it made me realise just how peripheral the Imperial experience must have been for thousands, perhaps for millions of people throughout the British Empire. In these days of instant global communication it is easy to forget that vast populations of poor rural people are almost completely excluded from any contact with the outside world, and what is true now was even truer then.

The headman made me realise something else. As far as I could tell he was not a hereditary aristocrat, like the Fon of Bum. He was simply the oldest and most experienced man in the village and had certainly fathered many of those present. This paternal role and the knowledge he had accumulated gave him the authority to make decisions for others, but even he had only the haziest idea of

what the plebiscite was all about. There was no doubt in my mind that democracy is a more useful system of government than any other, and I regarded the exercise in which I was involved as a start in that direction, but a plebiscite really only makes sense when people can make an informed decision about the choices open to them, or at least follow the guidance of someone they trust. The people here certainly trusted their headman, but his writ did not run outside their own tiny village, and if they wanted to make their wishes known they would have to get in touch with someone far more influential in the world beyond the forest. Like the men and women of Wum and Fonfukka, the Esimbi did not trust outsiders, but in their case they were even more cut off from the greater community around them.

However, mine not to reason why. I had a job to do and I did it, dutifully making my speech and trusting that, by the time it had been transmitted from Samuel to the hunter and from the hunter to the villagers of Itiaku, it still made some kind of sense. Forty or fifty people heard me out in respectful silence. They asked no questions, voiced no opinions. At the end of it all I had the feeling that I might as well have talked to myself. But I reassured myself with the thought that even if all this guff about the plebiscite was meaningless, it did not mean that my visit was without purpose. At least, the people here realised that something momentous was about to happen to their whole country and that it might very well have a bearing on the future. They also knew that each of them would have a small say about the outcome, whether or not they fully understood its implications. By such slow, incremental changes, people gradually acquire the means to take charge of their lives, even if those changes take many years to unfold.

Looking round the village, it was easy to see that the people here were less sophisticated about the modern world than the people of Wum, where even the poorest man might wear a tattered T shirt and an ancient pair of shorts, and even the poorest woman might possess a few imported kitchen utensils of plastic or metal. The people in this village had nothing imported at all. Their clothes, and everything else they possessed, came from the forest. Their homes were much smaller editions of the square grasslands houses, built of saplings and vines, daubed with mud and thatched with palm fronds. Inside, they were dark and smoky. For the first time I had my tent erected in the largest open space in the village and indulged myself, after the long muddy journey, by having a thorough soak in the canvas bath that came with the camping gear.

I was in the midst of my ablutions when a woman stuck her head into the tent and gave me a cheerful grin. I tried to wave her away, but she failed to go, so I threw my sponge at her, which simply made her laugh and come right inside the tent. She may not have been familiar with Europeans, but she was a great deal less frightened of me than I was of her. In a mild panic I called for Pius and asked him what was going on. Pius explained cheerfully, if invisibly, on the other side of the tent wall, that the chief had sent her to help me with my

bath, “and anything else you want” he added, with a giggle. In the end I had to get Pius to fetch the hunter to translate my politely phrased request that she should get the hell out of my tent.

In the late afternoon the headman came and asked me whether I would like to go with him to a place, quite near the village, where a hot spring came bubbling up through the forest floor. I think it was my having a bath that put him in mind of it. The hunter was very excited about the hot spring because he said it was a place where the ‘bush cows’ came to wallow. These animals are dwarf cousins of the huge horned buffalo that wander the plains of East Africa. I say dwarf, but they are still large and dangerous animals and I was thrilled at the possibility of seeing one. So, bathed and refreshed, I agreed to another walk through the forest.

We came to a muddy pool, fed by an even muddier stream that smelled strongly of sulphur and seemed to rise up directly from some subterranean spring. Steam drifted over the surface of the water, which was almost too hot to touch. The bush cows had trodden down the banks just as cattle will do around an English pond, but in many places they had reduced the pool itself to a muddy slough. It was obvious that they liked to wallow for hours in the warm mud and that a brave hunter might be able to steal up on one and kill it, like Marat, in the bath.

There were plenty of fresh bush cow tracks around the wallow, but although we had been as quiet as possible, the animals had disappeared into the forest. Our hunter swore he would return to this place, wait in hiding until they came at night and shoot one with his ‘Dane gun’—one of the primitive black powder muskets that were the only firearms available to Cameroonian hunters in those days. I imagined the long wait in the dark, the smell of sulphur, the looming shape of a bull buffalo materialising silently out of the forest. I thought too of the fearful unreliability of damp black powder in an antique flintlock, the danger of firing and missing, or the worse danger of hitting but merely wounding such a large and dangerous animal. Rather him than me, I thought.

That evening the women of Itiaku put on a dance for me, just as the women of Fonfukka had done. As they danced, they went through a series of well-defined manoeuvres, all moving together, rather like a chorus line, except that they always danced in a circle. One moment they would all turn their backs and bend forward, so that their little fibre aprons twitched upwards. Then they would straighten up again and shuffle forward a few steps, then twirl around on the spot, and so on. I noticed that one of the women did not join the circle, but stayed within it, rocking to and fro to some inner drum beat of her own. She had abandoned the fibre apron and danced entirely naked, and this was mildly shocking because, despite the sparseness of their dress, the other women took great care to guard their modesty. When I asked about her, it was explained to me that she had bad spirits inside her, but that the dance helped her to keep the bad spirits at bay. Evidently she was mad, whatever that means, and the

community did not shut her out but allowed her to join in this collective activity in the only way she knew how. I wondered, rather sardonically, whether such a thing would have been socially acceptable in the England of those days, and thought not. These people may not have had much in the way of advanced technology, but they knew a lot about care in the community.

I also discovered by chance that they had an interesting way of dealing with child abuse. This was not a matter that I would normally have thought about, but the following morning, as we set off for the next village, we came across a party of small children shouting insults and hurling sticks and stones at something or someone who was hiding in the bush on the far side of the stream. It took me some time to extract the whole story, but it appeared that they were throwing missiles at the local paedophile. As I understood it, a man in the village had been caught molesting a child, or the child had told its parents what had happened. The whole community, most of whom must have been related to him in one way or another, had been involved in hearing the case and the upshot was that he was expelled from the village. No question of vigilante violence, no police, no formal trial. Just exile.

In this forest environment, with fish in the stream, game in the woods and abundant gardens of fruit and vegetables all around, there was no physical hardship involved, or at least none greater than everyone else experienced. He could easily build himself a hut and fend for himself as well as the next man, but he was an outlaw, forever excluded from what you might call decent society. He might of course have fled the district, drifted into a town, made a different life for himself and possibly even returned to his unpleasant habits with someone else's children. But he was an Esimbi. The forest was his home. He stayed where he was.

Shunned by the adults, he lurked close to the place where the children came to fetch water, and watched them from a hiding place in the bush. Perhaps his intentions were predatory, or perhaps he just longed for any kind of human contact, but if the children spotted him they would immediately set up a hue and cry and drive him away with a volley of missiles. I have no idea whether this was a common situation in Esimbi society, but what struck me most forcibly was the level of awareness that the children possessed. In my own youth, child abuse had been a taboo subject, something so appalling that it was only ever mentioned in hushed tones, and I am sure that the result of this was that many children suffered in guilty silence, afraid ever to mention the matter. Here, the children knew exactly what had gone on and could act on that knowledge. What they did may not have been kind, but it protected them from harm, and, as with the mad woman at the dance, it seemed to me that this small society had ways of coping with social aberrations, which were both more open and in some respects far wiser than our own.

I spent several more days in Esimbi country, travelling right up to where the Nigerian border must have been, if there had been anything to mark it, and then

in a loop back through the forest to the south, visiting three other villages before returning to Wum. In fact the day we left Itiaku we got lost again and took even longer to reach the next village of Muneng, which was as remote a place as I have ever seen, and where even the headman had never travelled beyond the forest. The more I saw of this country, the greater respect I had for the people who lived there. More even than the people of Fonfukka, they were in control of their own lives. War, famine and vast political upheavals in the greater world around them might have come and gone without their even realising that anything was wrong. As long as they had the forest they could provide for themselves, and they used its resources with such a light touch that they could go on living in the same way for all eternity, if only the chainsaws of progress would allow them to do so.

Shortly after I returned to Wum and I was alone in the house because Nigel was away on trek, I was woken in the small hours by a knock on the door. I was slightly alarmed, because I had never known anyone call so late and most local people were far too frightened of witches and bad spirits to wander so far from the town at night, so I decided to stay put and let my spear-toting night watchman sort it out.

After a few minutes there was more knocking, more insistent than before. No robber would be quite so brazen, I thought, but the night watchman ought to have heard. The lazy blighter was obvious sleeping on the job. Cursing under my breath, I put on my clothes and went out, still fuddled by sleep, to find a police constable, immaculate in smart grey shirt and shorts, nervously clutching his bicycle on the front porch. There were six constables and a police sergeant at the station in Wum Three Corner and I knew them all by sight, but I had never had any dealings with them before and I was surprised to start now.

“What do you want?” I asked, rather grumpily.

“Sah, we di’ need your Land Rover and your driver. Our Land Rover, e’ no go.”

The constable of course was speaking in pidgin, a distinct language with its own grammar and syntax that I never really mastered, but the meaning was clear enough. What a time of night, I thought, to come borrowing a car.

“Why do you want it now?”

“De sergeant Sah, ‘e very sick, ‘e go die. ‘E mus’ go for hospital, one time.”

The nearest hospital was in Bamenda. For much of the way this rocky mudslide of a road skidded along the edge of a steep escarpment, dangerous in daylight and lethal at night. It was just as well that my driver Daniel was an artist at the wheel. I went to find him.

Normally, Daniel slept in Pius’s house, a few yards from the back door. Close to the entrance, I found the sleeping night watchman, but no Daniel. So I had to wake Pius and ask him where the driver might be, but he had no idea. The problem was that Daniel was more than just a good driver. He was a tall, good-looking young man of great personal charm. He was unattached, had a

high-status job in local terms, and was possessed of the sophisticated air of one who has travelled widely and knows the ways of the world. Not surprisingly, the local girls found him extremely attractive. The question was which local girl might he be with tonight?

I considered banging on doors around the town, trying to track down my errant driver, but soon abandoned the idea. If the police sergeant was really sick we had to move fast. Fortunately, Daniel had left the keys for the Land Rover on the hook where he was supposed to leave them. We loaded the constable's bicycle onto the back and on the way up to the station I tried to get the nervous young man to explain what was wrong with the sergeant.

"Tiger whisker", he said.

I knew that 'tiger' was pidgin for leopard, but what on earth did leopard whiskers have to do with illness? Perhaps it was some local hooch that the sergeant had been guzzling and he had passed out. Serve him right, I thought. The truth was I did not like the sergeant. I had only met him once, but I had often seen him strutting around the town with his stick under his arm. He was built like a wrestler, with a thick neck, powerful shoulders and an angry scowl that seemed to have formed a ridge of scar tissue across his heavy brows. He had a reputation for brutality, both with men and with women.

"This tiger whisker, why did it make the sergeant sick?" I asked.

"Dis new wife, 'e chop um small small, an put um for garri," he said.

I began to understand. Leopard's whiskers are very stiff and sharp. Chopped up finely they would be very much like powdered glass, and in garri, the gritty porridge made from cassava flour, the pulverized whiskers would pass unnoticed. I could also guess at the motive that had led the sergeant's new bride to try and murder her husband. I had seen her once or twice, a slender girl of about sixteen, hardly more than a child. It was widely believed that the brutal policeman had beaten his first wife so badly that she had run away, so I could imagine why the poor girl might have been driven to try and poison him. I thought I could also visualise the ghastly effects her vengeance might be having on the big man's digestive system, but my worst imaginings were nothing like bad enough.

We could hear his screams above the sound of the engine as we pulled into the station yard. Four constables, one for each flailing arm and one for each wildly kicking leg, carried him out to the Land Rover. They were all four strong young men, but they could scarcely hold him. His whole body was writhing and he was bellowing with pain like some great wounded beast. He was wearing nothing but a blood-soaked dressing gown, but what was truly horrifying, as I drew nearer and shone my torch on him, was that I could see that he was still bleeding copiously from every orifice, mouth, nostrils, anus, everything.

The short wheelbase Land Rover was not a good ambulance. The compartment at the back was no more than a steel box a few feet square and the rear wheel arches narrowed the space still further. Somehow the constables

loaded their wounded sergeant, still kicking and screaming, into this unforgiving space. Two of them climbed in after him to hold him down, while the rest of us packed blankets and towels around him, to staunch the flow of blood and give him what little comfort we could.

Two other policemen climbed into the front. I drove. It would probably have been safer to let one of the constables do so, but I was responsible for the vehicle when Daniel was not around, even though I was not as good a driver as he was. It had been raining heavily during the earlier part of the night and the road was even more treacherous than usual. I did not have Daniel's experience in handling the sickening four-wheel skids, and I rarely saw the rocks before we hit them, but somehow we bumped and slalomed our way through the forest, up the hills, down the hills, round the bends and along that dreadful escarpment on the road to Bamenda. I was almost grateful for the fact that it was dark. The weak light of the muddy headlights bounced off the trees as we passed them, so that we could not see the churning river below, but what made the journey truly nightmarish was the police sergeant's bellowing screams, and the clanging of his fists and feet against the walls of his steel coffin.

After the first two hours the hammering in the back diminished, but the sergeant did not finally stop screaming until we came to the first houses on the outskirts of Bamenda. When he did stop he stopped completely. In the swiftly growing light of the African dawn we reached the hill overlooking the town and I knew his agony was over. He was dead.

We drove to the hospital anyway, and while one of the policemen went to try and rouse someone, I walked round to the back of the vehicle to try and work out how to unload our passenger with as much dignity as possible, before rigor mortis set in. By now it was daylight and I could see the sergeant's face. When a black man dies his skin turns grey. That was how he was, grey and calm, eyes mercifully closed. He had even lost his scowl, but I could not mourn him. The most I could summon up was a kind of dispassionate empathy, because I would not have wished that pain on anyone, but at the same time I suspected that if this murder victim had not been such a brute he would still have been alive and well.

I pulled away one of the towels. The whole of the back of the vehicle was dark and sticky with blood.

"Come on. Let's get him off", I said to the policemen. There was blood on their smart grey uniforms.

"No Sah", said one of them. "Better wait for the doctor".

"But he's dead isn't he?"

"No Sah. I don't think so."

I could not see any sign of life, but I was not going to argue the point with someone who might well have seen more of death than I had, so we waited until an orderly arrived, carrying a stretcher. He told us that the doctor had not yet come in, but that there was a nurse on duty in the mens' ward.

The orderly, helped by one of the constables, carried the still body across to one of the two long breeze-block buildings that served as wards. Inside, most of the beds were filled with other recumbent bodies, but a male nurse emerged from a side room and helped the stretcher team to lay the sergeant on an empty bed. The nurse then spent a long time feeling the sergeant's pulse, glancing at the faces of the policemen around him as he did so, but finally he nodded, said he was still alive, and started to undress him. The comatose body was still wrapped in the bloody dressing gown, but at least the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

"What about a blood transfusion?" I asked, dimly aware that this might be necessary. After all, most of the wretched man's blood was in the back of my Land Rover.

"The fridge is broken" said the nurse.

I took this to mean that there was no blood available for the sergeant. Well, if he's not dead now, I thought rather callously, he soon will be. Nobody can lose that much blood and still be expected to live. By this time it was past six o'clock and I thought I had done everything I could usefully do; the constables seemed to be anxious for me to go, so I decided to drive to the rest house and try and catch up on some sleep. I explained this to the policemen, said I would be back later to see the doctor and catch up on the sergeant's progress, and left them to it.

At the rest house, the staff found me a room without any difficulty and, if they were surprised by the story I had to tell, they did not show it. I made arrangements to get the bloodstained towels and blankets washed and the back of the Land Rover cleaned up, then, despite the horrors of the previous night, I got my head down and slept for a good four hours. By the time I had borrowed a razor to shave with, tracked down the policemen's laundry and driven back to the hospital, it was almost noon.

Inevitably, a different orderly was on duty. There was no sign of the police constables either. I thought they might still have been keeping watch over their recumbent boss, but I did not think it likely that he would have survived this long. So I was not surprised, on entering the men's ward, to find that the bed the sergeant had occupied was empty.

I questioned the nurse. Again, it was a different man from the one who had been on duty first thing in the morning.

"What happened to the police sergeant who was in that bed this morning?"

"There's nobody in that bed, Sir."

"I can see that", I said testily, "but I brought in a very sick police sergeant who was in that bed at six o'clock this morning. What happened? Is he dead?"

The nurse looked at me blankly. He obviously thought I was deranged. He had come on duty at 7 a.m. The bed had been exactly as I saw it now and the night nurse had said nothing about a police sergeant. He showed me the book where details of all new admissions were supposed to be registered. There was

nothing to suggest that anyone, alive or dead, had been brought in during the night.

Feeling bewildered and slightly alarmed, I went round the ward, trying to question the other patients about what had happened. Some were too ill to talk. Others said they had been asleep and others again failed to understand my amateurish pidgin English. After about ten minutes of this the nurse told me I was disturbing the patients and that it would be better if I left.

I went to the hospital reception area and tracked down the doctor. He was an expatriate GP who spent three or four hours a day at the hospital and the rest of his time in local practice. He could throw no light on the case of the disappearing police sergeant, beyond suggesting, in the mildest and most elliptical of ways, that perhaps I had imagined the whole thing.

I called at the Bamenda police station and told the whole story to a bored-looking desk sergeant, who scribbled something in the diary, but was otherwise unhelpful. No, he had not seen any of the policemen from Wum Three Corner. No, there had been no reports of poisoning, whether of a police sergeant or anyone else. I thought of trying to speak to the superintendent or inspector in charge, but I was beginning to feel slightly foolish. Apart from a pile of slightly damp but anonymous laundry I had nothing to back up my story. There was no longer even any blood in the Land Rover, though there were certainly more flies than usual. I told myself that I had a job to do back in Wum and I was just wasting my time. The police sergeant, alive or dead, was no longer my problem.

On the long drive back I was no longer so sure. After all, this was a case of murder, or at the very least, attempted murder. And what about the wretched girl who had poisoned the sergeant's garri? Had she made her escape before the full effects of her handiwork had made themselves felt, or had the other policemen already locked her up? I had to know, and I also felt that I had to make a full report of the whole bizarre incident to the District Officer.

At that time Jack Griffin must have been around fifty and had been in the country for many years. I will not say that nothing escaped his notice, because a great deal always went on in every colonial territory that no white administrator knew about, but Jack was shrewd, and very well informed. He was no longer in his office when I finally got back to Wum, but I found him at home, in his tin-roofed bungalow overlooking the lake to the north of the town. He gave me a whisky and we sat on the veranda as I blurted out my account of the events of the previous night.

Jack heard me out from beginning to end and he obviously believed my story, but he then made a number of observations that made me feel a bit of a fool. The first was that the police had chosen to come to me to borrow a vehicle, even though the District Officer's own vehicle and driver were much more easily available. Why? Was it perhaps because they reckoned that my driver and I, as relative strangers in this part of the world, would be easier to manipulate than a local man? Did they even know that my driver was otherwise

engaged and that they only had me to hoodwink? Jack was convinced that the constables never had any intention of leaving the police sergeant at the hospital. There was a famous medicine man in Bamenda who was believed to be able to bring back men from the dead. Jack's theory was that the constables had thought that I might not agree to take their moribund boss to such an unconventional practitioner. So, rather like the woman's husband in Fonfukka, they had waited until my back was turned, then bundled the body into a local taxi and carted him off to the medicine man. It would have been easy for them, as policemen, to frighten everyone at the hospital into silence. Anyway, even though what they had done was dishonest, perhaps even unwise, it was not exactly illegal.

"But this is a case of murder, or at least attempted murder. What should be done about that?"

Jack looked relaxed. He pointed out that there was no point in getting hot under the collar about the criminal aspects of the case until we knew whether the sergeant was alive or dead, and that was bound to come out within a day or two. If the sergeant had died, the police themselves would be obliged to make a full report. If he was still alive, the sergeant himself might or might not wish to pursue the matter.

"But what about the young woman who used the tiger whisker? What should be done about her?"

Jack laughed. "She'll be long gone. She probably made a run for it as soon as she knew the sergeant had finished his supper." Then he added, more soberly, "I believe she comes from a bush village up north, way outside our jurisdiction, but she may not have got very far."

I did not ask what he meant, because I did not think he would spell it out. I thought of a terrified young girl, alone in the night with blood on her hands, with no one to turn to in the town and only the bush to hide in. I thought how easy it might be for a couple of fit young policemen to run her down and take the law into their own hands. It was easy for people to disappear in the bush. My heart went out to the girl and I hoped she had run as far and as fast as possible, and that the rain had come down to cover her tracks.

I had work to do that could not be postponed and knew I would not be around to make further enquiries. Jack promised to let me know how things turned out and I took my leave. I called at the police station on my way home, to see if the girl was in the cells, or if there was anyone else around who could throw light on the matter, but the place was deserted apart from an old crone sweeping the steps. I left the policemen's laundry with the old woman and went on my way.

Early the following morning I had to go off and begin a series of visits to far-off villages and announce the arrangements for the next stage of the plebiscite. There was a timetable that had to be adhered to, as far as was reasonably possible, and all the villages had been warned of my visit in advance.

I did not return to Wum for a week, but when I did I went straight to the District Officer to find out what had happened. Unfortunately, he was in court and I could not reach him, so I went to the police station instead. One of the constables who had been with me on that dreadful night was on duty. I asked him what had happened after I left the hospital in Bamenda.

“Which hospital?” he asked.

The constable was no older than I was and he had a bland, unthreatening face. I decided to try and tough it out.

“Don’t give me that,” I said as harshly as I could. “You know bloody well what I’m talking about.”

The constable still stared straight back at me.

“I dunno what massa ‘e say,” he said, in a kind of stage pidgin. “De sergeant ‘e dey for town. ‘E done go walka walka.”

I knew very well that he was making a fool of me, but there was absolutely nothing I could do or say that would make him tell me more, and I no longer even had the laundry as damp testimony to what had happened that night. I left the station in disgust and headed for the centre of town to see if I could make any sense of his remarks about the sergeant. I did not even have to look very far. There, in the market place at Wum Three Corner, a familiar figure was strutting proudly past the Fulani milk sellers who were always there, with their calabashes full of sour milk and rancid butter.

I pulled over. The sergeant walked up to me, perhaps a little thinner in the face and slower on his feet than usual, but he still looked astonishingly fit and strong. I could not believe it. Here was the man who had lost many pints of blood, screaming with agony in the back of this same vehicle only a few days before, and here he was, immaculate in his smartly pressed uniform. I was utterly amazed, but what made my flesh crawl was the broad, self-satisfied smile on his normally scowling face.

“Good morning, Sir” he beamed.

“Good morning, Sergeant. I believe you have been a little unwell. I hope you’re feeling better.”

“Should I feel better? I’ve not been ill, Sir.”

“Oh. I must have been mistaken.”

“I think so, Sir.”

I knew I was beaten, but I could not leave it at that.

“How’s your wife?” I asked.

“Oh, that little bush girl. I had to send her back to her family. She did not know how to be a proper wife.” He smiled again, with his cold little eyes looking straight into mine. “She was a terrible cook,” he said.

The District Officer saw no useful purpose in holding an enquiry into these events, though I believe he quietly advised the police that he knew more than they were prepared to disclose. So I never did discover exactly what happened after I left the hospital that morning, but I do not doubt that Jack Griffin was

right and they really did cart the sergeant off to see the famous medicine man. I still found it hard to believe that even the most talented local practitioner could revive a man so close to death without the benefit of modern medicine. In my admittedly limited experience I had never seen anyone lose so much blood and still recover without the benefit of a massive transfusion. On the other hand, as Jack Griffin observed, I was not a medical expert and that sergeant was certainly a man of quite exceptional strength. Just as in the case of the woman in Fonfukka, there were also the healing powers of the medicine man to be taken into account and those remain a mystery to this day.

The fate of the sergeant's young wife also remained a mystery. I liked to think that she made the long journey through the bush to her own remote village, far across the border in the Northern Cameroons, and maybe even lived to find another, gentler partner. At the same time I could not help reflecting that she had found a remedy for brutality, and had shown that she had the ruthlessness to use it. The next man to come her way would do well to treat her gently, and if he could not be gentle he should find someone else to do the cooking.

4. *registration*

All over the territory, 25 other Plebiscite Officers were completing the same tasks at approximately the same time. It must have been around the middle of October 1960 that we all finished the first Public Enlightenment Campaign and began the long chore of registration. For this operation, we needed to recruit a staff of clerks, train them in the job they had to do, and then send them off to all the villages we had located and get them to register the names of all the men and women over the age of 21.

The registration forms were straightforward enough. At the head of the sheet was the name of the electoral district—mine was Wum Central—and the name of the village where registration was to take place. Then there was a series of columns running down the page, headed name, age, sex, place of birth etc. This last was important because the franchise was open only to men and women who had actually been born in the territory. There was dark talk among some politicians of a possible influx of illicit voters from across the borders that might swing the vote one way or the other.

No doubt in some areas it was easier, but in Wum there was a great shortage of potential registration clerks who were themselves over the age of 21, literate enough to extract the required information from the would-be voters and fill in the forms accurately. Most of the possible recruits were drawn from the small number of young men who had attended the Roman Catholic primary school in Wum a few years before. Ideally, they should at least have attained Standard 6—roughly equivalent to Year 6 in an English primary school—but, because of late starts, language difficulties, irregular attendance and all kinds of other problems, many young people had to repeat a year, perhaps several years, and they often did not finish primary school until they were 16 or 17. A few might go on to secondary school, but the parents of most of them would not have been able to afford it, even if the pupils had reached a high enough grade. Anyway, there were not enough Standard 6 graduates available, and in some cases we had to settle for Standard 5.

As far as I can remember I had to hire 20 registration clerks, and it says something about attitudes at the time that we (I think this probably goes for everyone involved with the plebiscite) did not even consider hiring young women, even supposing that any had been available. So I gathered all my male recruits together in the very crowded living-room at the house and rehearsed them in the task of form filling. After some hours of practice, as tedious for them as it was for me, I was satisfied that all of them would be able to do the job fairly well. I issued each of them with a small cash advance and a supply of stationery, and packed them off to the various villages in my district, with strict instructions that they should send for me if they ran into any difficulty. This

meant that I would have to be on call at the house for most of the following three weeks, until the registration period was complete, so I could not go off on trek for days on end, which was the aspect of the job that I most enjoyed.

However, this relatively leisured period gave me a chance to travel down to Bamenda, renew my acquaintance with the Club and do some shopping. There was a Kingsway store, like a shabby version of one of those budget supermarkets that are so popular today on the outskirts of many English towns. Here one could buy tinned bully beef, tinned vegetables, and various other luxuries unheard of in Wum. In Bamenda market we could also buy fresh vegetables, such as potatoes and cabbages, which were impossible to find closer to home. There was also a cold store, with a supply of meat in recognisable joints, which made a change from the bloody hunks we got from the Hausa butchers. Finally, joy of joys, there was a reliable source of beer by the case-full.

On one of these trips I also called on the Marriotts—the kind people who had found Pius for me. Mr Marriott was due to return home in a few weeks' time and he offered to sell me an antique shotgun. This ancient piece, made in Oldham in 1898, was a double-barrelled pin-lock hammer gun, converted to take modern 12-bore cartridges. I can no longer bear to shoot anything, but in those days I was enthusiastic about the idea of augmenting our rather tedious diet with game, and I bought the gun on the spot. I also bought, probably illegally, an old .303 rifle and a small supply of ammunition, with a view to going back to the forest and trying to hunt down an antelope, or even a bush cow.

I am ashamed to say that I tried the shotgun out the same night that I bought it, shooting a harmless owl in the light of the headlights as we returned to Wum. To my surprise, my driver Daniel rushed out and picked up the little feathered corpse, saying that it was good chop. I could not bring myself to eat owl, but I did take to keeping the shotgun in the front seat of the Land Rover and shooting 'bush fowl'—a bird rather like a partridge—whenever the opportunity allowed. Sometimes I could garner three or four of these birds on a single journey, mostly because they sat in the middle of the road, staring at me until I killed them. I ate bush fowl without remorse.

This enthusiasm for blood sports brought me into contact with Jack Griffin, the District Officer in Wum, who was very keen on shooting and fishing, though I never confessed to murdering bush fowl as they sat on the ground, because Jack would have considered such a thing unsporting. Jack must have been in his early fifties at the time, and his left leg had been badly damaged in an accident. He also suffered from filiarasis—river blindness—an eye disease caused by a minute parasite in the bloodstream, but neither of these disabilities seemed to put him off his favourite sport, which was fishing in the Menchem River for tiger fish. We went together one Sunday to the rapids below the Menchem Falls, where the white water raced between massive rocks. This was an exceptionally beautiful spot, quite close to the road from Bamenda to Wum. I am not a skilled fisherman and I stayed sedately on the bank, trying to

manipulate my little glass-fibre rod, while Jack strode out into midstream, flailing the current with a spinner. Neither of us caught anything, but it was enough to be there, by that magnificent river, pitting our wits against the elusive fish.

There was one other diversion in which I did have some skill, and that was riding, because I had ridden horses of all shapes and sizes since childhood. While on trek I had often admired the Fulani horsemen, especially the Bororo, galloping their unshod horses hell for leather over the hills. They would put their mounts at a downhill slope that no other riders I had ever seen would have attempted, and the agile little animals would charge full tilt down near vertical cliff faces, studded with rocks and littered with loose shale. I did not care for the bridles the Fulani used, especially the vicious bits that could cut deep into a horse's palate, but I longed to ride as freely and wildly as they did. One day a group of young men saw me watching, and one of them offered to let me try his horse, kindly adjusting the stirrups before I mounted. As soon as I tried to mount with a flourish, I realised that he had loosened the girth, just for the fun of it, and the cloth saddle was sliding off the horse's back. I slid off with it and was left sprawling on the ground, much to the amusement of everyone watching.

However, I decided I would not be content until I could ride like a Fulani. I found a young man named Daudu, the son of a Hausa butcher, and Daudu helped me to buy a Fulani stallion. This little horse, whose name was Buba, was no more than 14 hands—the size of a large pony—but he was well muscled and strong enough to bear my weight easily. We built a stable for him in the compound, and Daudu became the horse boy, Buba's full-time carer. Daudu kept him fed and watered, and put him out to graze with a hobble around his forelegs. If I was busy, he would also ride Buba around the town, cutting a dash by riding bareback. I also rode bareback to begin with, but then I managed to acquire an English saddle and a bridle with a snaffle bit, both of which must have been utterly unfamiliar to the poor horse. Nevertheless, he suffered me on his back and we made little expeditions into the surrounding bush, not quite in Fulani style, but in sufficiently lively a manner to keep us both amused. At this time, we were still in the tail end of the rainy season, and the grass was too tall to allow for free-ranging gallops across the hills, but I was determined that the next time I went on a grassfields trek I would go on horseback.

At around this time, there was a new arrival at Wum station. Geoffrey Rajasooria had been sent out by the United Nations Secretariat in New York to monitor the plebiscite in our area. Geoffrey, known to everyone as Raj, was a rotund and lively fellow, who quickly familiarised himself with the process. He was a Tamil, born in Sri Lanka, but he had worked for many years as a journalist on the *Straits Times* in Singapore before joining the UN. He had a sharp eye for anything that suggested political manipulation and I think we all felt that he would ensure, as far as he could, that the conduct of the plebiscite would be

impeccable. Life in New York on UN pay had also given him a taste for the high life and he brought an air of sybaritic refinement to the rustic surroundings of Wum Three Corner. He was also good company, and one of the first things he did on taking up residence in the rest house by the lake was to invite the local plebiscite staff to a curry supper, which he cooked himself. I remember that the curry was so salty as to be barely eatable, but the whisky and beer flowed freely and we all enjoyed the evening.

From time to time, other observers from the UN came to Wum station, and sometimes took advantage of the visit to meet the Plebiscite Officers. The most memorable of these was a Russian named Lev Emilianov. Emilianov delighted in the freedom from KGB surveillance that this remote corner of Africa afforded him, and he was full of scurrilous stories about the absurdities of life in the Soviet Union. He himself was an aristocrat, or at least he claimed to be one, and he had nothing but contempt for the old Bolsheviks who still wielded power in Russia. Knowing this, I brought up the then recent incident in New York, when Krushchev had taken off his shoe in the United Nations General Assembly and banged it on the rostrum to hammer home his point. "What do you expect" cried Lev in obvious distress at this lapse of good manners, "when a great nation puts a peasant in power?" The most congenial person in Wum, from his point of view, was the District Officer, Jack Griffin. The two old conservatives would sit on Raj's veranda, Lev with his bottle of vodka, Jack with his Scotch, and together they would mourn the passing of empire and of a political order, when a few enlightened aristocrats laid down the law for the great unwashed. We young Plebiscite Officers would listen to this stuff in stunned amazement.

All the same, these social occasions were important because most of the Plebiscite Officers spent a lot of time on their own. Chris Edwards, a very lively and sociable fellow, lived alone at a village called Mbelifang, 15 miles down the road to Bamenda. Andrew Baring, whose manner suggested wealthy and aristocratic connections that no one could quite fathom, also lived on his own, so these two were quite frequent visitors to Wum. The problem was that in those days there were no telephones and the postal system was erratic to say the least. So organising a social life was problematic.

In this respect Nigel and I were luckier than most of our fellow officers because we shared the house and had each other's company when we were not on trek. Nigel was the kindest and most considerate of men. Although he himself was a non-smoker, he tolerated my dreadful cigarette habit and never expressed irritation over any of my more eccentric habits. We got on very well. In retrospect, it seems to me that I must also have been fairly tolerant. Nigel had acquired a baby Mona monkey. This little animal, named Frambo after a local politician who was bought and paid for, proceeded to take over the house whenever they were both at home. It was impossible to relax if Frambo was on the loose in the living-room. No papers were safe from his prying fingers. He

could break a pair of spectacles in a moment and shred a book in a matter of minutes, but his most disturbing habit was that of leaping around the room from one piece of furniture to another, especially as he was happy to use a Plebiscite Officer's head as a landing pad whenever it suited him.

This gymnastic display might not have been quite so disturbing if Frambo had not also developed a taste for whisky. I would be sitting down with a glass in my hand, often trying to read while keeping a wary eye on the monkey, when he would suddenly leap on to my wrist, dip his lips in the glass, and suck up a surprisingly large amount of liquid in a very short space of time. Then he would be off again, leaping wildly around the room. Unfortunately, he did not have a good head for strong liquor. A couple of circuits after his last sip of whisky and he would start to miss his footing. Ornaments would crash to the ground and pictures would be knocked out of alignment. Worst of all, he would miss his target altogether and hit the wall instead, or land ignominiously on the floor. At such times he would sometimes become so distressed that he had to be cuddled back into equanimity.

Frambo also had the habit of trying to feed people he was fond of, presumably imitating his mother's method of feeding him. He would seize a banana from the bowl on the table, dissect the skin with delicate teeth and fingers, and masticate a large chunk of squashy fruit in his capacious cheek pouches. He would then descend on the person he had chosen to cherish that evening and try to feed him. If it was me he would find my mouth firmly closed, so he would look for any other available orifice, an ear say, or a nostril, and try, with remarkable persistence, to stuff masticated banana inside it. Of course it was not impossible to fend him off, but he would come back again and again, and though I might win in the end, it was always at the price of having to wash sticky smears of banana off my hands and out of my hair, my ears and anywhere else he had tried to stuff it.

Perhaps it was just as well that Nigel was often away, and always took Frambo with him. Nigel's territory of Fungom was vast and remote, and he was faced with longer journeys than I, so he was sometimes away for weeks at a time while I was engaged in daily meetings in Wum town. On these occasions I would usually finish work around sundown and eat supper quite early, perhaps around 7 pm; I would then be faced with long evenings alone under the hissing Tilley lamp, catching up on paper work or reading a book. Pius and the other servants were quick to make themselves scarce as soon as supper was over, so even if I had wanted their company, they did not appear to want mine.

However, if I was alone in the house, there were sometimes visitors who came after dark. They always waited until Pius and Lomas had finished clearing up and had retired to their little house at the back. Then there would be a gentle knocking on the front door, just loud enough for me to hear. I will let one of these visits stand for them all, because they were all much the same.

I go to the door. A young girl is standing on the doorstep.

“Good evening, Master,” she says, so quietly that I can scarcely hear her.

She is standing in the shadow, eyes cast down. I cannot see her face.

“Um, good evening,” I mumble. “Why don’t you come in?”

She enters hesitantly and, following my directions, she goes into the living-room, which is lit by the fierce white glare of the Tilley lamp. She stands there, head still bowed. I see that she is wearing her very best clothes, or possibly someone else’s best clothes, dressed up just as she will be to go to the mission church on Sunday. She is frighteningly young, perhaps sixteen, certainly no more. Two or three cockchafers are buzzing noisily about, doing their usual aerobatics around the Tilley lamp, and for what seems like hours this is the loudest noise in the room.

“What can I do for you?” I ask at last.

Silence. She glances up at me with her huge brown eyes, then quickly returns her gaze to the floor. I can smell the scent she is wearing and I notice the inexpertly applied face powder on her cheeks.

“What’s your name?”

Another long silence.

“Agnes.”

“Hello Agnes, my name is John.” I hold out my hand and she offers me hers. We shake hands.

“Yes, Master,” says Agnes.

“Well Agnes, so what can I do for you?” I ask again, for lack of anything else to say.

She looks at me, silently amazed at my stupidity, but she manages to mumble, so quietly that I can scarcely hear the carefully rehearsed line.

“Would you like me to make you happy, Master?”

I don’t know which of us is more embarrassed, but I suspect it is me.

“Um, well, no actually. I mean, I think you’re very pretty and everything, but I think it would be better if we just ... er”

I look distractedly around the room, unable to continue looking her in the face, and my glance falls on the big jar of sweets I keep to give to the children who sometimes come begging at the door.

“Would you like a toffee?”

Much to my relief, and probably to hers, she accepts the proffered jar, takes a handful of sweets, and swiftly makes her exit.

I must not exaggerate the number of times this happened. It may have been no more than two or three, and after a month or so the nocturnal visits ceased altogether, but I have often wondered what would have happened had I been less inhibited, or more unscrupulous, and taken advantage of one of these girls. Even now, I am sure it would have been unwise, probably even cruel. I never knew whether the girls came willingly, or if they had been pushed into it by members of their family, to try and extract money, or perhaps to procure some other advantage, such as a job. One or two of the more manipulative big men in

the town may even have sought to try and compromise me in some way. Of course I could have avoided the young schoolgirls and sought out one of their big sisters in the town, but the dangers would have been much the same. Even though sexual mores were fairly flexible in Wum in 1960, there would have been some in missionary circles who would have looked at any such relationship with profound disapproval, and even the most fleeting of affairs would have resulted, at the very least, in damaging gossip. Anyway, whether out of caution or cowardice, I stayed as chaste as a virgin throughout my stay in the Cameroons.

This sexual continence had one effect that opened my eyes to an aspect of the relationship between the sexes that would not otherwise have dawned on me. Quite often, I would look out of the living-room window in front of the house at the end of the day, just before the sun went down, and watch the women coming back from the fields. They were of all ages, from aged grandmothers to girls still in their teens, and they were always happy to be on their way home after a long day's labour. They carried their hoes and long 'cutlass' machetes in their hands and baskets full of fruit and vegetables on their heads and as they walked they sang. I believe the form their singing took is known as antiphonal. One woman would sing out a line, loud enough for all to hear, and the others would answer, taking up the line and adding a refrain to it. Some rugby songs I knew had a similar form, but were usually less musical. However, the rugby songs and the women's chants had this much in common. Both were apt to be salacious and both could be used as a means of making jokes at someone else's expense. Quite often, the women's chorus would collapse with laughter before they had even finished the refrain.

It was a joyful sound and I always looked forward to hearing it, but one day it seemed to me that the laughter was especially loud and raucous just as they drew alongside the house.

I called Pius and asked him what they were singing about.

Like the girls who came in the night, Pius looked at his feet and said nothing.

"Come on Pius. I know you understand some of the language. What are they saying?"

Just then there was an explosion of mirth among the walking women and even though all of them studiously avoided looking in my direction I felt sure they were singing about me.

"They say you have no girlfriend, Master," said Pius, squirming with embarrassment. "You send all the girls away."

Well that's true enough, I thought, but surely not funny enough for hysterics. At this point there was a fresh outburst.

"I know that's not all of it Pius. What else does the song say?"

Looking slightly relieved, Pius replied "They say you have much power Master, and you can do it all the time."

"So how do I do it without a girlfriend?"

At this point Pius grew more embarrassed than ever, laughing nervously and shuffling his feet. "They say you have an extremely small penis Master, and you only do it with all the little goats."

Small wonder that I was celibate in the Southern Cameroons.

However, at least I saw the joke, and once my vanity had recovered from the shock of being mocked I began to look at the women with new respect. Despite the fact that they would step aside from my path, bow their heads and avoid my gaze, this metaphorical bowing and scraping was entirely superficial. It seemed to me that they regarded all men rather as I and my fellow recruits in the army had once regarded the NCOs in our platoon, as authority figures who had to be placated, but who were at the same time inherently ridiculous, and suitable targets for coarse jokes and libels of all kinds. In this respect I was just like all the other men that the women came across, a prime candidate for satire.

I began to deplore the fact that the separation between the sexes was so profound in this part of Africa. Outside the immediate family circle, men and women seemed always to move, to work, even to socialise in single sex groups, men with men, women with women. My own team was entirely male and I could have done with some women around me in order to understand at least half the population a bit better than I did. They might also have been helpful in explaining some of the more bizarre aspects of Cameroonian society, such as the case of the unfinished registration form that I was shortly to have to investigate.

At this time I was busy visiting those registration clerks who were working in the town or fairly close to the road, and could therefore be reached within a day's journey. There were a number of difficulties that the clerks could encounter. Sometimes they were doubtful about a prospective voter's age. There was no way of being certain about this, unless the person happened to have been baptised, because there was no register of births and deaths in the Southern Cameroons in those days, but it was usually possible to work out an approximate date by connecting it to some local event—the year of the big storm, the year when such and such a headman died. The more contentious issue of where precisely a man or a woman had been born was not usually in doubt, because in most of the rural villages everybody was at least distantly related to everyone else and had known one another since earliest infancy. But old colonial frontiers sometimes cut straight through ethnic groups, and in these cases, close to the borders, a man or a woman might easily have crossed from one territory to another when he or she first got married. The plebiscite schedule allowed for a period of revision, prior to the poll, to allow such complications to be sorted out, but it was obviously preferable to get things right in the first place. Unfortunately, this did not always happen.

Early one morning, when we were in the middle of registration, a messenger came to the house with a letter from a young man named Daniel—not Daniel the driver, but Daniel the registration clerk—who had been given the job of

registering all the voters in a village called Su-Bum, about 20 miles from Wum Three Corner. The letter was terse, but to the point: "Sir, come quick."

I remember questioning the messenger to try and find out what had gone wrong, but he was a thin, scared-looking boy of 15 or so, who just looked at his feet and shuffled his toes. I knew that Daniel was the cautious type, anxious not to do anything wrong, and if he had come across one of these knotty problems to do with place or date of birth, he might just have downed tools until I arrived to help him sort it out. So I got Pius to give the messenger something to eat and sent him back with a note to say that I would come to the village in two days' time.

On the appointed day we drove most of the way, because the village was not far from the road, but we had to walk the last couple of miles through the bush. Although it was only about 7 am we could hear the drums going as soon as we left the car, so we knew that a big crowd would have assembled in the village. The local interpreter, Stephen, and the headmaster of the mission school that Daniel had attended, were the only people with me. I was grateful that the headmaster had agreed to come, because I often relied on older men of his standing when it came to deciding the trickier questions of local law and custom, but he was too preoccupied to be of much help that morning. The path wound through a patch of trees, which meant that the sun had not reached the path to dry it out after the rains of the day before, and the poor headmaster was wearing a smart pair of black shoes that were quickly covered in reddish-brown mud. We stopped on the outskirts of the village, where he used a bunch of grass to try and clean them up.

Daniel hurried to meet us. He looked even more apprehensive than I had expected, but he would not reply to any of my questions. He simply handed me his most recent registration form and urged me to accompany him. Hundreds of people, women and children as well as men, were crowded into the headman's compound. Usually the women were anxious to go out to the fields as early as possible in the morning, so their presence suggested that something important, or at least extremely interesting, was expected to happen.

The headman and a small congregation of village elders were waiting for us on the raised platform in front of the headman's house, and they came forward to greet me as soon as we entered the compound. In all the fuss and confusion of a Cameroonian greeting I failed to notice that one person had remained on the platform. As the crowd cleared a little, I could see that person clearly for the first time.

Cameroonians are modest people. Although in those days their clothes were often not much more than rags, and most of the women went topless when they worked in the fields, both sexes always wore some kind of covering around their loins, even if it was only a small cloth. The person on the platform in Su-Bum was not only topless, but bottomless as well. Working downwards, with growing incredulity, I saw first a fully bearded face (full beards are very rare in this part

of the world), then a magnificent bosom, then an imposing and extremely feminine belly and hips, and finally a large penis on full display.

In the uncertainty of the moment I could not imagine what this most unusual, not to say lewd exposure was all about. To cover my confusion I examined Daniel's incomplete registration form with careful attention. The last entry read something like *Name: Teacup Ndong, age: 35, place of birth: Su-Bum, place of residence: Su-Bum*. I must have read it several times before the penny dropped. The column marked 'sex' had been left empty.

Urged on by the headman I approached the platform. Teacup looked down at me with what seemed to me like a rather smug smile on his/her face. I peered, with increasing disquiet, at what lay between those massive thighs. Obliging, Teacup spread them wide and displayed, with evident satisfaction, a generous set of male and female genitalia, one on top of the other.

The drums were still. There was a faint rustle of leaves in the trees overhead as some small bird shifted its perch, the distant wail of a baby not yet old enough to know better, otherwise silence. Three hundred or more people were waiting, with total attention, for the words of the Plebiscite Officer.

I was in that state of panic that induces complete paralysis. So many solemn words had been spoken about the absolute necessity for total accuracy in every detail of these tedious forms that there was no room for ambiguity. You could not just jot down 'M/F?' in this space and leave it at that, or every registration officer would be writing '20/21?' for age, or 'Su-Bum/Fonfukka?' for place of birth. It seemed to me that the validity of the entire process in the eyes, not just of the population of Su-Bum, but of the whole of the Cameroons, perhaps of the United Nations General Assembly itself, depended on my decision. No wonder poor Daniel had dithered over what to do, but he might at least have warned me what to expect so that I could have worked out some kind of response in advance.

I looked desperately at the headmaster, usually such a fount of wisdom in expounding the mysteries of local affairs, but he was staring fixedly at his ruined shoes. I thought frantically, how does one really tell the difference between a man and a woman? What subtle gradations between male and female are concealed beneath modest coverings everywhere in the world? Who is to say, without the benefit of medical science, whether this person or that is predominantly masculine or feminine?

The answer was staring me in the face, but there was a long and increasingly uncomfortable silence while I tried to work out a sensible answer. I prevaricated by asking a series of questions on my own account.

"Why is Teacup sitting on this platform, which is reserved for the big men of the village?"

Stephen translated. I never had the slightest idea what he was saying, but I was not entirely surprised when, after a long and complex exchange, the answer came back.

“The headman say ‘e don’ know, Sir.”

What does he mean he doesn’t know, I thought irritably, when it must have been he who arranged this show in the first place? But I had learned, by this time, that it never paid to show impatience. It always antagonised people and might well have betrayed the fact that I was not at all sure what to say next.

“Does Teacup have a husband or a wife?”

Again, the interminable exchange between Stephen and the headman. For heavens’ sake, I thought, it’s a simple enough question.

“No Sir”.

“Does Teacup sit on the village council?”

The discussion went on longer than ever.

“The headman say ‘e no dey for council.”

I should explain that ‘e’ in pidgin English does not have a gender. It refers indiscriminately to man or woman, boy or girl, even to an inanimate object. If Teacup had a place on the council I would have known that he must have been considered a man in this most sexist of societies, because only men were ever permitted to occupy a position of such importance. On the other hand, there were plenty of men in all the villages who did not have such a place. So this reply told me nothing. Next question.

“Does Teacup go out and work all day in the fields with the women?”

This time the answer was swift.

“No Sir”.

Time for the clincher.

“Does Teacup stay in the village all day and drink beer?”

“E drink beer Sir.”

“Then say to the headman that he has already given me the answer. All the people here know the answer,” I added, embracing the multitude with a theatrical sweep of my arm. “Teacup may have the breasts and body of a woman, but he does not work in the fields with the women. Instead he drinks beer with the men. So Teacup is really a man.”

I held high the form, groped for a pen in my pocket, put an ‘M’ in the blank space on the registration form and handed it back to Daniel.

There was a murmur of approval. I would like to say it was applause; it was really more of a collective muttering and mumbling around the compound as everyone took this in, but at least there were no objections. I may not have given the right answer. Who knows? The point was that I had made a decision and there was just sufficient justification for it to be acceptable. A man is not a man, or so it seemed to me, because of any additions or subtractions to his bodily parts, but because the society in which he lives accords him the rights and privileges of a man. So the question was resolved, the form filled in, the integrity of the plebiscite preserved. I looked at the headmaster and, dirty shoes forgotten for a moment, he smiled back at me.

5. *more enlightenment*

When registration was complete and we Plebiscite Officers had gone through all the hand-written lists and corrected any obvious errors, we all had to take ourselves back down to Buea, where a team of secretaries, freshly recruited for the purpose, were waiting to type up the lists. While these poor women painfully deciphered the handwritten forms, we were able to take a few hours off, exploring the forest on the foothills of Mount Cameroon and even spending an afternoon on the beach. I remember that there was also a reception at the old German *schloss*, where the Commissioner presided, and several less formal gatherings in the bar of the Mountain Hotel. Nigel and I also took the opportunity to invite all our fellow officers working in our division to come up to Wum for Christmas.

As soon as we had corrected the typescripts, we took the finished forms back to our own districts and had them posted where they would be available to everyone in each village. This was to give an opportunity for people to point out omissions on the list, or to make objections against the inclusion of anyone they believed to be unqualified as a voter. The timetable allowed for these objections to be heard later on at specially convened magistrate's courts.

Once the lists had been posted, we all set off to tour our districts on the Second Public Enlightenment campaign. This time we had the help, if you can call it that, of a booklet specially prepared for the purpose, called *The Two Alternatives*. The title alone provoked a scornfully pedantic reaction from some of us. Why *two* alternatives, we wanted to know, when the word 'alternatives' is sufficient in itself? Beneath the title were the words 'Printed by Authority', without specifying whose authority it was—The United Nations? The British Government? The Southern Cameroons administration? The authors obviously wished to remain anonymous, but the plodding legalistic language had all the hallmarks of the British civil service and it appeared to be strongly in favour of Nigeria, though this bias, as things turned out, was not entirely the fault of the authors.

On the opening page of the document, which I have in front of me now, there is a preamble, giving a summary of the origins of the plebiscite and the implications of making one choice or the other. The consequences of joining Nigeria, the pamphlet says, "have been made clear in undertakings given by Nigerian Ministers". The implications of joining the République du Cameroun, on the other hand, are not at all clear, either in the preamble or in the text that follows. In fact, on the second page (given as Page 4, for some reason) the authors administer a schoolmasterly ticking off to the Southern Cameroons Prime Minister, John Foncha, and the President of the République du Cameroun, M. Ahidjo. The pamphlet states that the two leaders had held several

meetings to decide the terms on which union between the two countries might take place. Then it continues “Her Majesty’s Government, as Administering Authority, have on several occasions enjoined upon those concerned the need for clarification of these terms.” The only result at the time of publication (date not given, but probably some time in November 1960) were “two joint communiqués which are reproduced in full on pages 13 to 15.”

In contrast to the arrangements for Cameroun, the terms for union with Nigeria described in *The Two Alternatives* are spelled out in detail; they allow the Southern Cameroons regional status within the federation, with its own parliament, on an equal footing with the other vast regions, and powers to decide on its own affairs, apart from certain federal Government matters such as fiscal and defence policy, that are enumerated one by one. There is provision for two Houses of Parliament, both at federal and regional level—one for elected representatives, the other for a 'House of Chiefs' and the document goes on to underline the powers of traditional rulers in another paragraph. It allows for a separate regional civil service, consisting only of Southern Cameroonians, and a separate legal system, including a High Court “with full jurisdiction in Civil and Criminal matters.” It also makes clear that the new region, in common with the rest of Nigeria, would be part of the Commonwealth. Significantly, it also says that “if the Federal Government and the Southern Cameroons Government were both to legislate on a subject on the concurrent list (these subjects are all spelled out within the text) the Federal Law would, in the event of inconsistency, prevail.”

The so-called ‘communiqués’ on behalf of the République carry the names of Mr Foncha, President Ahidjo and his newly appointed Prime Minister, M. Charles Assale. This document implies, without actually saying so, that the precise constitutional arrangements are on hold, pending a new constitution in the event of reunification. It speaks vaguely of “a federal basis allowing for the particular conditions of each group, which could not be automatic but gradual”, and it lists a handful of federal powers “as a minimum.” There is no mention, except by inference, of separate legal systems, or state assemblies under the federal umbrella. It makes clear only a few specific intentions, for instance, that “in no case will the United Cameroun be either a part of the French Community or the British Commonwealth”. It also says that “no measures contrary to the interests of one state will be imposed upon it by the majority”, but it does not specify what kinds of measures these might be. As with Nigeria, there is a let-out clause giving the ultimate power to central Government—“in the event of a conflict between the laws of the Federal State [i.e. the central Government] and the Federated States the federal law shall prevail.” However, unlike Nigeria, it does not say what areas of legislation the writers of the document have in mind.

The contents of *The Two Alternatives* posed a mystery to those reading it for the first time. Why were the provisions for joining Nigeria so detailed, while those for joining the République were so vague? It has since become clear that

M. Ahidjo was in no hurry to specify the precise terms for the administration of a new federal republic in the event of the voters of the Southern Cameroons choosing 'reunification' with Cameroun. He himself was a Muslim from the north of the République and his core supporters were drawn from the same region. From his point of view the Southern Cameroons, with its majority of Christian and pagan voters might well turn out to be a political liability. In fact, Ahidjo would probably have been quite happy to see the Southern Cameroons united with Nigeria. What he really wanted was union with the largely Muslim Northern Cameroons, which was holding its own plebiscite at the same time.

In any case, the Constitution of his own country at independence gave him enormous powers and, as in most former French colonies, his Government was highly centralised. Why should he choose to weaken his own constitutional position by deferring to the wishes of the Prime Minister of a much smaller territory that offered him few political or economic advantages and which might or might not choose to merge with his own? Ahidjo was playing a waiting game, and, for reasons that are still not entirely clear, Mr Foncha played along with him. Was he bought off in some way? It is highly likely that he was offered the Vice-Presidency of the new federation, if it should come into being, because that was the office that eventually came his way. Some historians believe he was simply outmanoeuvred by Ahidjo. Others hint at darker reasons for his hesitancy.

Nevertheless, we PSOs were expected to carry out the second Public Enlightenment Campaign, using *The Two Alternatives* as our bible. I carried no brief for either side, but it was a tough job trying to be even-handed when relaying the contents of this lop-sided paper to the general public. Assuming that voters of the Southern Cameroons might be interested in the future powers of their state or regional government, their legal system, their educational and civil services, we could be precise about these things in an enlarged federation of Nigeria, but could only say that these issues would be decided after 'reunification' in an enlarged Cameroun. The more suspicious members of the audience at our meetings concluded from this that we were favouring Nigeria and refusing to disclose the arrangements for the République.

The United Nations observer, Geoffrey Rajasooria, was furious about *The Two Alternatives* when he first read it. His first assumption was that it was a blatantly pro-Nigerian tract issued by the British Government and he claimed that the UN Trusteeship Council might invalidate the whole plebiscite because of it. However, when Raj made further enquiries from his own superiors, he discovered that the vagueness about the future arrangements for 'reunification' was not part of a British plot, but a result of prevarication on the part of the politicians concerned. Then the rage he had felt against the British was directed, in my hearing at least, against Mr Foncha, for not driving a harder bargain while he still had the power to do so.

Raj came with me when I held one of my first meetings in the second Public Enlightenment Campaign. He listened, scowling, while I trotted out a précis of *The Two Alternatives* and dealt, rather uneasily, with some of the questions. Then he took the floor himself, rather fiercely reminding the audience of the powers they had as voters, and urging them to press their politicians for answers to specific points. Then he too had to field some questions. I remember one of them as though it was yesterday. A man called out from the crowd, speaking in English.

“Sir, you are our brother. You are like an African and you will not tell us lies.” The man was implying that the deep brown of Raj's skin guaranteed his impartiality, whereas everything I said was suspect. “Which way should we vote in this plebiscite thing?”

“I am not your bloody brother”, shouted Raj furiously. “I am an official from the United Nations in New York. It is not my job to tell you what to do. It is up to you to decide.” And so on. In the end, he adopted a more restrained tone, but he was unable to avoid responding to the questions in much the same way as I did.

There was one other issue connected to *The Two Alternatives*, which gave rise to some complaint. Arrangements for polling were described. People would cast their vote in a green box if they wanted to join Nigeria, a white box if they wanted to join Cameroun. Some KNDP supporters asserted that green in local custom was the colour of life and vitality, while white was the colour of death. If this was true, then it did suggest an attempt at manipulating the vote in favour of Nigeria, but my own enquiries failed to confirm that anyone took the issue seriously. Few people that I spoke to saw any special significance in one colour or the other. I do not know, however, whether this perception held true in other parts of the country.

As time went by, I became increasingly convinced that it made little difference what I said at the public meetings, even though people were on the whole politely attentive. The issues that the prospective voters cared about had nothing to do with constitutional arrangements, but were about local loyalties favouring one side or the other. Mr Foncha, as I observed above, had a strong following in the grasslands and many people evidently felt a greater affinity for their ‘cousins’ on the Cameroun side than they had for Nigerians. ‘Ibophobia’ was widespread and the KNDP took full advantage of it. Dr Endeley's CPNC, on the other hand, seemed to take little interest in the campaign, perhaps assuming that the violent upheavals in Cameroun would win the case for Nigeria. Issues to do with the system of government, with justice, with education, were not being presented to the people by their own politicians, and nobody else was doing it either.

Quite apart from the problems of relaying the contents of *The Two Alternatives* I felt increasingly disenchanted with the whole process, because I still felt that the British Government had abnegated its responsibilities, forcing the

people to make a difficult decision, with far-reaching consequences, without adequate preparation. Many Southern Cameroonians continued to plead for the colonial administration to be prolonged for a little longer, to give them a chance to make informed decisions about the future, but both the UN and the colonial authorities had refused to countenance this option. On the contrary, with Ian MacLeod as Colonial Secretary, I knew that the British Government of the day was only too eager to wash its hands of the Cameroons and every other colonial territory it could plausibly consider 'ready' for independence, as quickly and painlessly as possible.

After the dreadful trauma of independence for India and Pakistan in 1947 and the attendant horrors of partition, there was little appetite for Empire in Britain, except among the most diehard of conservatives. It is one of the ironies of post-war African history that Africans speak fondly of 'the struggle for independence', and there were indeed hideously violent struggles in French and Portuguese colonies such as Algeria, Angola and Mozambique. But as far as the British were concerned, the truth was that the only colonies where the administration made a serious effort to delay independence were those with large white settler populations, such as Kenya and Rhodesia. Wherever the cost of running the territories exceeded the revenue from taxation, which was certainly the case in the Cameroons, the British were only too pleased to dump them as soon as they decently could.

The only reasons for hesitancy in handing over power were connected to the Cold War. In all their colonies the British tried to ensure that the incoming African administration was not too left wing and therefore likely to fall into the Russian sphere of influence. In the Southern Cameroons this was not a serious problem. The only socialist party of any consequence was the UPC, a small Francophone group, which had been brutally repressed and forced into exile by the neighbouring French colonial authorities. Exiled members of the UPC had eventually set up their headquarters in Kumba, whence the British had evicted them in 1957, and, despite the efforts of their leaders to drum up international support, they were not serious contenders for power in 1960. All the real problems for local politicians derived from the fact that there were simply not enough of them with sufficient experience to do the job properly. And that in turn was a direct result of a niggardly British administration, which had failed to provide the educational and political opportunities that were much more readily available in wealthier countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria. A small United Nations Trust Territory with few resources had just not been worth the expense of development.

By this time I saw the whole plebiscite as a cynical public relations exercise, designed to demonstrate to the world at large that the people of the Southern Cameroons were being given freedom of choice, whereas in fact the only choice they really wanted was denied to them. I held to a strangely rose-tinted view of a benign British administration at the same time as I deplored it, arguing

passionately in favour of independence, even though I believed that the outlook for local democracy was bleak. I did not think that local politicians would necessarily have the interests of their constituencies at heart. I also thought that they would be far more susceptible to corruption than the outgoing colonial administration. At the same time I believed then, as I still believe today, that it is only by freeing a country from colonial rule that it can really find its own way forward and that this idea was fundamentally right, provided only that the people were properly prepared.

The failure of the British administration to prepare the country for independence is borne out by the facts. In 1960, in defiance of the terms of the UN trusteeship agreement, British or in some cases Nigerian officials still held the majority of the senior posts in the civil service. There were far too few well-educated Southern Cameroonian politicians and civil servants to run an effective administration. For a total population of about a million, perhaps a third of which was under fifteen, there were only three secondary schools, and two of these had only been in operation for a couple of years. The few mature men (women scarcely came into it) who had had the benefit of secondary education were mostly rich southerners, whose families had packed them off to school in Nigeria. Some of them had stayed there, taking advantage of a richer and more vibrant economy, and only a handful had returned to the Cameroons to take a serious interest in the political processes that were meant to precede independence.

The development of political institutions had also been tardy and haphazard. Throughout the period of mandate and trusteeship the British had administered the territory as part of Nigeria. The first elections in which local politicians were invited to take part were for the assembly of the Eastern Region of Nigeria in 1951, and only seven representatives went on to the federal assembly in Lagos. The first political party in the Southern Cameroons was not formed until 1953 and it was not until 1954 that the territory gained even semi-autonomy, with an assembly devoted exclusively to Cameroonian affairs. Even then, only 13 members out of a total of 25 in the assembly were elected, the remainder being Government appointees. Following fresh elections and a constitutional conference in 1957 the assembly was enlarged to allow for 26 elected members and a House of Chiefs was formed, with powers similar to those of the House of Lords in London. In the last elections prior to independence, held in 1959, JN Foncha was elected premier, but his powers were strictly limited and the territory was still constituted as a region of Nigeria.

These elections had been based on a very limited franchise, consisting only of registered tax payers. There were only about 125,000 of these in 1959, even though there must have been about half a million Southern Cameroonians of voting age at the time, and their elected representatives found it difficult to reach a consensus about arrangements for independence. It was this failure to find agreement that led to the matter being referred the United Nations General

Assembly, and the subsequent arrangements for a plebiscite involving the entire adult population.

It seemed to me therefore, looking back over less than a decade of real political development, that only a handful of men had been given the opportunity to gain experience in government, that this experience had only been for a very short time, that it had involved very little real exercise of power, and that it had galloped along without any reference to the great majority of the people. For all these reasons I felt that ordinary citizens were being rushed into making a decision, with vast and unforeseeable consequences, before they had been given time to understand all the issues involved.

All the same, I had taken the Queen's shilling and was a paid-up member of the team. Either I would have to do as I was told or I would have to resign, and this I did not want to do. So although these jaundiced opinions preoccupied me quite a lot of the time, they did not completely destroy my interest in doing the job I was paid to do as efficiently and dispassionately as I could, and that meant trekking earnestly about the countryside, pressing on with a great many meetings and reading out the provisions set out in *The Two Alternatives* as convincingly as I could. Once I had finished with Wum town itself I moved out into the satellite villages. It was at one of these, close to the ring road, that I next came across the Nkoh.

It was market day in the village, and the meeting had attracted an unusually large number of what I had come to think of as young radicals, belonging to both of the main political parties. They were mostly young men who had spent a few years working on the plantations in the south of the country and had come back home, only to find that the elders of their villages were not impressed by their smart trousers, shirts and sunglasses. These young men had usually accumulated enough money during their years on the coast to feel they could get married and settle down to a life of leisure with a wife obtained for them by a senior member of the family. However, the elders did not always provide the required wife and the nice little farm that might keep one of these young men in comfort. So they tended to feel disgruntled. They welcomed change because they had nothing to lose, and because they felt they might do better by embracing it. Most of all they wanted to see an end to the power that the elders still retained over village and local affairs and they entered into the democratic process with real enthusiasm.

I felt some sympathy for these young men. They were just as hungry for an end to colonialism as I was and I was glad they were so keen to get to grips with the political process, but they did have a habit of barracking loudly during the course of my meetings, and sometimes shouting out questions that sounded more like insults. That day was particularly difficult. The market place was so crowded that I had to climb up onto the bonnet of the Land Rover so that I could be seen above the heads of the crowd, but despite the advantages of this podium I had great difficulty in making myself heard above the general hubbub.

It was all quite unlike the polite submissiveness that I had experienced at such gatherings earlier in the process, and I began to wonder if I should abandon the meeting and postpone it to another day. Then suddenly I noticed a ripple of activity on the edge of the crowd. People were running about, shouting and screaming as though they were frightened. The crowd was so pressed about the Land Rover that I could not have got down, even if I had wanted to, so I stayed where I was and waited to see what would happen.

The ripples of panic spread wider and wider until the large open space was frantic with running, shouting people, and in a surprisingly short time the whole crowd had gone—not just withdrawn to the edges of the square, but absolutely gone, disappeared. Even the smart young men in sunglasses had vanished along with everyone else.

Only a single prancing, dancing man in a mask with no face, a ghostly white body and a cloth around his waist, was left in the square. Behind him, attached to a long taut rope, came the hangers on. Then came the man with the dracaena leaves and the drummer, thudding out his staccato rhythm. I noticed that the dancer was not wearing a leopard skin and his make-up was a bit perfunctory, as though he had dressed in a hurry, but as a demonstration of conservative political power in the face of radical opposition it was impressive. I concluded that the elders in the village had decided that democracy was not an option they favoured, and were determined to do something about it, so the Nkoh had gone into action. The meeting was abandoned all right, but not as a result of any decision of mine.

There was absolutely nothing I could do about it. Feeling irritated, I climbed down from the Land Rover and crossed the square to where the Nkoh was doing his act. I think I had the absurd notion of giving him a good ticking off. Like his fellow magician in Aghem he was a large and powerful man, and if I had thought he might attack me I would have been running away just as fast as everyone else, but I did not think it likely. The Nkoh's brand of intimidation relied on magic, not muscle.

To my surprise he did not advance threateningly to meet me. Instead, he crouched in a submissive position, as the local women were sometimes apt to do, and waited for me to come up to him. I remember thinking that this was a kind of joke, that he was daring me to try and see him off, but neither of us said anything. You can't really have a conversation with a man in a mask. Not knowing quite what to do, I picked up the little camera that always hung from a lanyard over my shoulder and snapped a picture of him. I knew that some people in the Cameroons had a superstitious fear of having their picture taken and I had some vague idea of using the photograph as a kind of counter-magic to his, so I made great play of taking the picture, gesturing at the camera in what I hoped was a menacing kind of way. As soon as I had finished with the camera he rose slowly to his feet. He did not start to dance again, but stood there, shivering all over, as though he was in a high fever. The juddering drum fell

silent. He seemed to be looking at me very closely. Then, very slowly and deliberately, he reached out one ash white hand and touched me on the shoulder.

It was a curiously intimate gesture, as though he was suggesting that he knew we were both playing games, only his game was better than mine. A fingertip on the shoulder, nothing more. Then he was off, dancing and leaping wildly in the air, dragging his little band of supporters behind him.

I cannot say his touch had no effect on me. In a curious way I think I felt a sense of anti-climax, as though this was the worst he could do and there was nothing to it—rather like having a flu injection that does not hurt, and feeling relieved when it is all over, while at the same time wondering why everyone makes such a drama out of it. However, he had certainly won his round of the game. There was nobody left in the square and all I could do was to round up my little party, get back into the Land Rover and drive away.

I do not think that anyone really expected me to suffer any evil consequences from my encounter with the Nkoh, and I certainly did not feel any myself. However, from that day forward I was never able to hold a meeting anywhere in the grasslands without having a faint apprehension that a dancing masked man would suddenly send the entire audience running for cover and leave me talking to the empty air.

The next meeting on the itinerary was at Fonfukka, where I had not been since my encounter with the woman who was bitten by a mad dog. I was anxious to find her again and see how she was faring after my clumsy attempt to patch up her hand, but I had forgotten her name and had made no record of it. However, it was not difficult to find her, because she came to greet me as soon as I entered the village. To my surprise she was still wearing the bandage that I had put on nearly eight weeks before. Worse, she still had her arm in the sling I had made out of one of my shirts; the muscles of her arm had begun to waste away and it was very stiff when she tried to move it. To my relief she let me cut the sling off and take a closer look at the bandage. At first I thought it was just filthy, but on closer inspection I saw that someone had deliberately coated the cotton with a dark, sticky mixture, and covered this with a mess of chicken feathers and scraps of dead vegetation. With some reluctance she allowed me to cut this off as well, and I was afraid I would find a ragged and suppurating wound beneath, but to my astonishment her hand had healed cleanly. The gaping wound had closed; there was scarring certainly, but the torn edges of skin had knitted together; even the ligaments seemed to function. She could articulate her fingers and she could grip my hand.

I was delighted and astonished by the way her hand had healed. When I made persistent enquiries about the sticky stuff on the bandage I eventually discovered that her husband had taken her to see the local medicine man as soon as my back was turned. This man had not interfered with the dressing I

had put on, but had said a number of powerful incantations, and anointed the outside of the bandage with his own mysterious medicine.

I was sure that nothing I had done was responsible for the near-miraculous healing of the wound, but when I tried to arrange a meeting with the medicine man, all sorts of polite excuses were made, and I never met him. It was a repeat of my experience with the disappearing police sergeant and the tiger whisker poisoning in Wum. Once again, the medicine man declined to come forward to claim any credit for what he had done.

Now that the sling had been removed, the woman gradually recovered the full use of her arm. I saw her working in the fields a couple of months later and as far as I know she never contracted rabies or suffered any further ill effects. Since that time I have often asked any doctor who was willing to listen for some kind of explanation of this case and, of course, given the fragmentary information I was able to provide, no one has ever come up with a satisfactory answer. Apparently, rabies is a capricious infection. Some people die as a result of merely petting an infected animal. Others are badly bitten and never contract the disease. It is possible that my quick cleaning of the wound had had some effect, but the healing of skin, muscle, nerves and ligaments defies conventional explanation. Which leaves us with the woman's own remarkable powers of recovery and the mysterious concoctions of the medicine man.

Even though I could take no real credit for the woman's astonishing recovery, I found that I now had an undeserved reputation as a doctor. I could not go anywhere, especially in Bum, without someone coming to see me and begging for medicine to cure some frightful disease. I saw lepers with stumps for hands and feet, men with half their faces eaten away by syphilis, others blinded by the filarial parasite, several with skin cancer and even one or two with elephantiasis. This last is a nightmarish disease. Parasitic organisms invade the body and block the lymphatic vessels, with the result that the surrounding tissue swells enormously, and the skin degenerates into grey, scaly folds. People end up with legs as thick as tree trunks and the hanging folds of scaly skin completely envelope the feet, so that their lower limbs do indeed resemble those of elephants. In the case of elephantiasis of the scrotum, the swelling can be huge and the victim is sometimes reduced to pushing the hideously enlarged organ around on a wheelbarrow. All I could do when confronted with these monstrous afflictions was to give my patients an aspirin and urge them to visit the nearest doctor.

When I left Fonfukka the following day I had to take again the steep trail to Lagha Bum, only this time I was riding Buba. Daudu had brought him all the way from our house at Wum so that I could have the privilege of doing this trek on horseback. Buba skipped up the rocky path with his usual goat-like agility and I was able to enjoy the view without feeling exhausted at every step. It was an exhilarating experience, but even Buba had to slow down when the going was really steep. There were often high rocks on one side of the path and a sheer

drop on the other—not spectacularly high, but high enough to kill us both—and it was at a particularly precipitous turn in the trail that he suddenly reared and threw me. Fortunately, I fell on a patch of scrub to the right, not over the cliff to the left. I was not badly hurt, and when I picked myself up I found that he had not strayed far. The path was so narrow that he was unable to turn, and, agile though he was, he could not walk backwards down that jagged staircase. Instead, he was standing, shivering all over in evident terror.

At first I could not see what had spooked him, but no matter how gently I spoke to him and stroked his quivering neck I could not get him to calm down. Nor could I persuade him to move forward an inch. In the end I had to leave him shivering there while I went round the bend in the path to see what lay ahead. There was a small tree, rooted in a crack in the rocks above the trail. At first I could see nothing odd about it, but as I peered I saw that a slim green snake was hanging, almost motionless, from the branch that leaned over the path. It was only about three feet long and I did not know whether it was venomous or not. All I knew was that Buba was terrified of it, and that if I did not find some way of getting rid of it there was no way that either of us was going to climb any further.

I did not dare to approach the snake too closely and my shotgun was far below, slung over Stephen's shoulder as he walked up with the carriers. In any case, after shooting the wretched owl on the Bamenda road I had made up my mind not to kill anything I did not intend to eat, so I did not want to harm it. I just wanted to frighten it away. It did not budge when I flapped my arms in the air and made shooin' noises, but just hung there, with its cold little head slowly twisting and turning at just the right point to intercept a man, or a horse, trying to pass up the trail. So I cast around for some kind of weapon, and I found a broken branch from that same tree, lying close by on the rocks. I snapped off the thinner end and was left with a small log, about a foot long, which I thought might make an effective missile.

The only problem was that even in those days I was hopeless at throwing anything. I was rubbish at cricket, useless at tennis. I could shoot straight, but that did not involve the coordination of arm, hand and eye in quite the same way. However, there was no choice. I had to try. I went as close as I dared, which was about five yards from the tree, and hurled the log as hard as I could. To my total amazement the heavy lump of wood struck the snake and knocked it clean off the branch. The wretched creature fell on the path a few yards from where I stood and lay there, twitching slightly. By some fluke the log had struck it just at the point where its sinuous length took a turn around the branch and its back was broken, almost in two.

I felt quite sad about the snake, but once I had taken its picture I hurled it off the edge of the cliff as far as I could. Even dead, it might have made Buba shy again, possibly with dangerous consequences. As it was, I had to drag the frightened little horse, hoof by dragging hoof, past the point where the snake

had been, and even then he did not stop shaking until we were several hundred yards further up the track. We had both just about recovered our composure by the time we entered the Fon's compound at Lagha Bum.

This time John Yai did not stand on ceremony. He gathered his people together and they all listened patiently as I did my piece on *The Two Alternatives*. Afterwards, he talked to me earnestly about his fears for the future. He was more than ever convinced that the plebiscite would undermine his own authority and that the whole elaborate social fabric of his tiny kingdom would be in danger of falling apart. In an attempt to explain the combination of powers, both temporal and spiritual, that gave him authority, he ordered one of his men to take out one of the most important masks from the storehouse where it was kept. It was a handsome piece of carving in characteristic grasslands style, with almond-shaped eyes and a well-defined nose. It was known as 'Langha' and the Fon told me that it was brought out for one of the most important masquerades that were held every year. As far as I could gather, the dancer who wore the mask symbolised all the evil in the kingdom. By dancing before the Fon and submitting to his authority the evil in the mask was somehow neutralised and rendered harmless to the rest of the population.

The Fon also showed me a pair of bell-shaped instruments, cast in bronze, which were sounded by beating them with a wooden baton. These bells, or gongs, were known as 'Ngumba'. They signified victory in war, and were regarded as a potent symbol of power. Taken together with ceremonial robes, the mask and the gongs belonged to a society known as Kwi-ifon, which also seemed to serve as a kind of privy council, advising the Fon on matters of policy in the kingdom.

The powers he exercised were quite considerable. Together with several of his nobles, including my friend Bala, he presided over the customary court—known at that time as a 'native court'—that decided local disputes and fined petty malefactors. Although he was not officially empowered to levy taxation on his subjects, there were various privileges and land entitlements that he could disburse in return for gifts. He also took—illegally I believe—an annual rent from the Fulani for the right to graze their cattle on the grasslands. However, the more I learned about the Fon's little kingdom, the more I realised that there were also limitations on his power.

Only a few hours march from Lagha Bum was a Fulani village called Konene. The Fulani had their own spokesman, or Ardo. His name was Makarikhi, and although he may have paid money to the Fon for grazing rights, he certainly did not take orders from him. A few miles further on there was another village called Saff, with a chief who also called himself a Fon and refused to recognise John Yai's suzerainty at all. He was rather a disagreeable old man, in a permanent state of envious rage, but I could never discover exactly what the quarrel was all about. The great majority of the other chiefs and quarter heads in Bum did recognise the Fon as their leader and took their own authority

from the fealty that they owed to him. On special occasions they would make the journey up to Lagha Bum and pay their respects to him. However, I got the feeling that this was not a relationship founded on fear of their overlord, more a kind of mutual agreement that worked to the satisfaction of all the parties concerned.

I could well understand how irksome these cosy arrangements must have seemed to ambitious young men of the kind who had tried to disrupt my meeting. At the same time I could see that it was a system that worked to the satisfaction of most of the adult men in the area. The only people who really suffered were the women, who were forced to do all the heavy work and often had to put up with the indignity of polygamy as well. At the time they did not seem greatly to resent these burdens, but as I was later to realise, there was a great deal of discontent simmering just beneath the surface.

My second tour of Bum passed uneventfully. Travelling from place to place was no longer exhausting because Buba allowed me to ride in style. People came to the meetings, listened patiently, dolefully repeated the questions about why they were being forced to choose between unwanted alternatives, and dispersed quietly when they realised I could not give them any satisfactory reply. I was not happy about it, but there was nothing I could do or say to make things any better.

Before I left his kingdom the Fon sent me a sheep-goat as a present. Why it was called a sheep-goat I do not know. It had horns, but it was certainly a sheep rather than a goat, and it bleated from time to time in the most depressing manner. The poor creature had a large piece of wood like a door clamped around its head, which allowed it to graze, but not to stray very far, or run very fast. I accepted it gratefully, because Nigel and I were expecting another six Plebiscite Officers to join us for Christmas dinner and, for want of anything better, the sheep-goat would be the main item on the menu. But what I really wanted to set before our guests was an antelope, and I was determined to organise a hunting expedition. With a few days' break in the schedule when I returned to Wum, this is what I then set out to do.

6. *revision*

Nigel was determined to join me on the hunting expedition, so, early one morning a few days before Christmas, we assembled a large retinue of carriers and kit on the edge of the bush close to the District Officer's house at Wum station and prepared to set off. Both of us had managed to clear three days in our schedules, which we blithely expected would give us plenty of time to bag the much-desired antelope. I always enjoyed going on trek, but this time, without the stress of having to make speeches and face tricky interrogations, I felt exceptionally relaxed and carefree. I remember waiting for the carriers to assemble. It was not yet light and the stars were still bright in the blue-black sky, but all over the town people had already lit the cooking fires for breakfast and the early morning air was full of the fragrant smell of wood smoke. It is a smell that, as long as I live, I will always associate with Africa.

As soon as we were satisfied that all the carriers had their loads and that nothing was likely to be left behind, Nigel and I set off ahead of the main party, carrying only my rifle and shotgun and Frambo the monkey perched on Nigel's shoulder. By this time the dry season was well advanced and it had hardly rained for a month. The emerald green of the grass had turned to yellow and the tall stems were withered and bent. Already, the Fulani herdsmen had started to burn great tracts of this desiccated grassland, so as to encourage new growth and provide fresh grazing for their cattle. Nigel and I scanned these areas carefully, hoping for any sign of wild game, but we were out of luck. No doubt the Fulani themselves had long since bagged anything worth having. Many of them had rifles or shotguns as well as bows and arrows that they used with great skill, but took care to conceal from prying eyes.

For the first hour we walked in the cool of the morning, which was always delightful, but as the sun rose and the heat increased, so the flies came out to plague us. We passed a number of Fulani compounds, which were no longer washed clean by daily rains, and the trampled earth around their little circular huts stank of cow dung and rancid butter. Wherever the Fulani and their cattle went, so too did the flies. Unlike the Tikari they did not live in settled villages, so they always knew they would move on and leave their encampments behind them, soon to be reabsorbed into the bush. All the same, it still surprised me that such a graceful and good-looking people should be so unworried by their own squalor. I remember once seeing a beautiful Bororo girl unwind her headgear to reveal her long straight hair so full of lice that they twinkled in the sunshine all over her head, like tiny fairy lights.

We reached the forest edge within a couple of hours and entered its green gloom with a sense of relief. Just as I had done before on the way to Itiak, we walked along the bed of the stream, not worrying about the state of our shoes,

and the coolness of the water was a delight after the hot dust of the savannah. As soon as we entered the forest, Frambo the monkey came to life, making noisy little excursions into the undergrowth in pursuit of butterflies or berries. Nigel and I scanned the ground on either side of the stream, looking for the spoor of forest antelope; we were excited to find a number of different tracks, but we did not have the skill to follow a trail through the forest. Then, quite suddenly, in a clearing by the stream we saw a tiny duiker, or dik-dik, as these little animals were known in the Cameroons. It had disappeared by the time I had unslung the rifle, but I was not really sorry. It was too small and too pretty for Christmas dinner.

We found the path without too much difficulty and reached the first compound of Itiakui in a little more than four hours. This embarrassed me because I had boasted to Nigel about the secret remoteness of the place and I knew that he had travelled far greater distances than I. On the other hand, from what I could gather, the woodland was not so extensive in his area, and it was the great tracts of equatorial rainforest between Wum and the Nigerian border that kept the Esimbi villages hidden from outsiders. Despite the fact that I had been here before, the Esimbi were not pleased to see us and the people did not come out to welcome us in the way that any Tikari villagers would have done. I could not blame them. I suspected that there was nothing in their life experience to encourage them to welcome outsiders.

We had time before the carriers arrived to go down to the bush cow wallow to see if the great beasts were in the area. To be honest, I was secretly relieved to find that the mud around the steaming spring had dried out and there were no fresh tracks to be seen. The idea of waiting up half the night and trying to shoot a bad-tempered bush cow at very close range did not appeal. African buffalo are notoriously difficult to kill because their skulls are reinforced with bony plates beneath their horns, which resist all but the most well placed bullets. In those surroundings, thick with sulphurous steam and close-packed tree trunks, there would be time for only one shot before the charging animal evened the odds. We returned to the village without, on my part at least, too many regrets, even though I had promised myself I would visit the place again if we had no luck elsewhere.

When we got back to the village the carriers had still not arrived, but Frambo decided to make use of the time to put on a show. He cavorted round the compound, making his usual circular progress, leaping from hut to hut, and using our heads as springboards along the way. One by one people emerged from their hiding places, watching and laughing as Frambo did his party piece. It often puzzled me that Africans in many different parts of the continent eat monkeys, even chimpanzees and gorillas, with great relish, but they also delight in their human-like antics and often keep them as pets. By the time the carriers finally arrived, the whole population of this small settlement had gathered

around us to admire Frambo; the fear and suspicion had vanished and they made the carriers welcome.

Once the carriers had enjoyed a drink and a short rest we moved on to the main village, where we were greeted by the chief. We pitched our tents in an open space and camped in some style, making use, in some cases for the first time, of all the equipment with which we had been issued so many weeks before. Before turning in for the night we consulted the chief about the best hunting grounds, and it was agreed that we should have the services of one of his sons, a young man named Fung, as our guide. Fung appeared, almost completely naked except for the most curious appendage I have ever seen. He had recently been circumcised and his penis was enclosed in a sheath made of a hollow stem that was attached to a taut string around his neck, giving the otherwise naked young man the appearance of permanent arousal. I could not help being afraid that this artificial erection might get caught on a branch or entangled with a vine in the forest, possibly with painful consequences. However, I could not find the words to say what I thought and Fung seemed unworried, so I let the matter pass.

We moved off the following morning at about half past five, and in the half light Nigel and I followed our guide up the steep hillside. Fung was doubly encumbered, because in addition to the prong sticking out from his groin, he carried a long Dane gun over one shoulder, but he moved very fast and we were soon puffing in our efforts to keep up, so we hung on grimly, knowing that it might be tricky to find our way back without his help. Fung was in no way hampered by his penis sheath and dodged overhanging branches and creepers with a dexterity that we could not match as we panted along in his wake. He spoke no pidgin, but said 'yes' to every gasped plea to slow down. This had no effect on his speed, but he probably thought it would confirm his reputation as a linguist.

High on the hillside, Fung showed us the long game fence that the villagers had constructed. It was an ingenious palisade of stakes, perhaps a mile or more in length, that snaked up and down the ridges and gullies that ribbed the slopes. At intervals along the fence were deadfalls, gaps in the palisade with heavy logs poised over them, cunningly fitted with trigger mechanisms to bring the logs clobbering down on any animal that tried to pass through. It was obvious that it would need the entire population of the village to conduct a worthwhile drive on this complex system of traps, so we decided to move on. Fung led us over the summit of the hill, from where we had an uninterrupted view over a series of wooded mountains and valleys, stretching unbroken to the far horizon. There was not a sign of any other settlement, not even a break in the trees or a patch of secondary forest to show where someone had once cleared the land for crops. All I could see was a vast panorama of virgin woodland that might well have remained unchanged for the past ten thousand years, but even then I knew that it was unlikely to remain so for very much longer.

For the next couple of hours we toiled over the slopes of this unspoiled wilderness. We moved as silently as we could, with Fung like a shadow ahead, pausing, sniffing, searching the ground and the treetops for signs of life. The only noisy member of the party was Frambo the monkey, who kept chattering and hopping off Nigel's shoulder to make his noisy expeditions into the undergrowth, screaming loudly if we failed to wait for him. Otherwise there was silence until Fung suddenly went still, pointing with his head and shoulders towards the treetops a hundred yards ahead. Following his gaze, we could just make out the dark, swinging shapes of a troop of monkeys, silhouetted against the sky. They were putty-nosed guenons, handsome creatures with black and white fur and clown-like white noses, and I had no wish to harm them. At the same time it was obvious that Fung regarded them as highly desirable quarry and the range was too great for the Dane gun he carried. Somehow I felt obliged to try and shoot one myself with the rifle. I still do not know if this was because I wanted to please Fung, or if I was reluctant to face the ignominy of returning to camp empty-handed. All I remember is taking careful aim at the biggest monkey I could see and squeezing off a single shot. By some fluke the bullet went clean through its skull and the surprisingly large animal came crashing down from the treetop while the rest of the troop took off in terror.

Fung whooped with pleasure and rushed forward to pick up the corpse, which he slung over his shoulder like a heavy fur pelisse. Weighed down as he was, he was no longer keen to continue hunting and Nigel and I were both tired, so we returned to Itiaku for a rest. Pius and Lucas skinned the monkey and prepared to stew it for supper. That evening I remember gazing at my own portion, which included part of the forearm and hand of what could easily have been a human child. I could not begin to eat it and I felt disgusted with myself for having shot the wretched beast.

Very early the following morning I took a hurricane lamp and Nigel and I tried to retrace our steps to the buffalo wallow, but I could not follow the path in the dim light and we had to give up. Later the same day we did visit the place and found that, after all, several of the great beasts had been there during the night; their huge footprints were deeply impressed in the mud and I now found myself regretting that we had missed the chance of trying to bag one. But now our time was up. It was the third day of our outing and we were obliged to return to Wum without anything to show for all our elaborate preparations.

The problem was that we had invited six of our fellow PSOs to a Christmas feast. Some of them would have had quite long and difficult journeys and we had nothing to offer them but the Fon's sheep-goat. Somehow we rustled up a few chickens and I made a last minute trip to Bamenda to buy vegetables, whisky and beer. Our guests duly arrived on Christmas Eve and we put up most of them in the rest house by the lake, where they at least had the pleasure of a swim and a sunbathe in beautiful surroundings. On Christmas Day the sheep-goat proved too tough and elderly for roasting, so Pius and Lucas boiled it and it

tasted predictably filthy. Fortunately, there was plenty of beer and whisky. Nobody seemed to mind the unappetising food as long as beer and conversation flowed.

Of course, the plebiscite was the chief subject of conversation. We had all had the experience of being asked for political guidance by our prospective voters. We had all faced the frustration of being unable to stray from the text of the absurd *Two Alternatives* document. To a greater or lesser extent, we had also shared the feeling that the Colonial Office had been negligent in failing to prepare the people of the Southern Cameroons for the huge responsibility of deciding their own future. Only one member of the group—much the most cynical in the party—boasted that he did not hesitate to give political advice to the voters in his division. They lived close to the Nigerian border and he claimed to have told them they would be fools to reject the chance of joining the bigger and wealthier country. Ironically enough, the decision in his division went solidly the other way when polling day finally came, so perhaps we all misjudged the importance that Cameroonians were likely to attach to any recommendations that we PSOs might have made. However, for the sake of the integrity of the whole exercise, it was just as well that there was only one of us who stepped out of line on the political questions, and even he may have been pretending to be more outspoken than he actually was. There was a lot of humbug about the man.

Immediately the Christmas break was over, we all had to attend to the revision of the registration lists in our separate divisions. I now understand that revision was a serious issue in some of the coastal districts, where there were many migrant workers whose identities were often difficult to prove. Local political activists scanned the registration lists for imposters of one kind or another and challenged their right to vote. Anyone whose name was objected to in this way would then have to appear before a specially convened magistrate's court and try and prove his or her right to participate. At the same time, those who felt that their names had been unfairly omitted from the published lists also had the right to protest. In the grasslands districts, where there had been far less movement of population than in some other parts of the country, there were far fewer such omissions and objections, and in the case of my own Wum Central division there were none.

PSOs were responsible for ensuring that those who were challenged and those who were doing the protesting should attend the courts on the appointed day. Some of us were also responsible for serving as the adjudicating magistrates, not in our own districts, where we might have stood accused of bias, but in other others as far removed as possible from our own. In my case, I had no protesters of any kind to bring to court. So it was that at the beginning of January 1961 I found myself travelling far to the east along the ring road to serve as the adjudicating magistrate in the so-called native court at Ndu, close to the border with the République.

On the day appointed for the first hearing I made my appearance, dressed in a suit for the first time in months, and took my place at an ink-stained table at one end of a large corrugated iron shed. In front of me were displayed a Bible, a Koran and a gun. The idea was that Christians, Muslims and pagans could all take the oath holding on to the symbol that they felt to be the most potent in ensuring their veracity. There was an interpreter of severely limited ability, a clerk and a constable to keep order. Members of the public were allowed to sit in orderly rows towards the back of the room, while objectors and respondents took their seats immediately in front of me. I have never felt less well qualified for the job I had to do. What did I know of these people, of their various histories, of the places where they were likely to have been born or the ages they purported to be? I did not even have an accurate map of the district or any written case notes in advance.

At 9 am it was already very hot under the tin roof and the protesters and their witnesses seemed to take an unconscionable amount of time assembling and preparing their statements. I decided to take notes of my own, some of which I have preserved.

Objector Gideon Gib brings three well-primed witnesses to show that respondent Fambo Nyembele is not the rightful Yah or Yai of Ndu and therefore has no right to vote.

She is really the chief's lover, so how could she be his sister, born in Mbirikwa? In any case she has filed teeth, so how could she lick the Koran with filed teeth?

I do not know what licking had to do with it, but the woman concerned grinned at me through sharp little triangles. She had certainly chosen to swear on the Koran and I took it that filed teeth were alleged to be a sign of pagan origins from somewhere across the border. The other three witnesses gave evidence. There were long dissertations about native law and custom, interminable parables about a waterbuck and an elephant and about Mohammed and the beggar.

I was completely lost. Were filed teeth really a sign of alien origins? Could anyone prove that Fambo was not in truth the chief's sister and therefore the rightful Yah of Ndu? If she was not, then where was she born? No one seemed to know. Case adjourned for further evidence and a coffee and a cigarette outside.

It is hotter back in the court room. A new case hangs on the age of a particular respondent at a particular time.

'How old was Nji Salifu when you first saw him?'

'You mean Nji Salifu?'

'I mean Nji Salifu.'

'Not very old and not very young Sir.'

'I mean was he a child or was he a man?'

'Not a child and not a man, Sir.'

'Was he this high, or this high?' (indicating heights)

'Not that high or that high.'

'Was he old enough to carry a load?'

'I never saw him carry a load.'

'Had he been circumcised?'

'I did not circumcise him Sir.'

And so on. Imagine this going on, with liberal gaps for translation though an incompetent interpreter, not to mention an incompetent magistrate. Imagine hurt or bewildered or indignant expressions alternating on the faces of witnesses and respondents in a steaming ill-lit shed with a white glare outside. Four days of this and I was exhausted. I believe there were only four cases and I dismissed every objection for lack of evidence after hearings lasting three hours, followed by longer sessions and long waits in hopes of stronger evidence, which never seemed to be available. Of course some of the respondents were rightly accused. Of course others were victims of malicious accusations, but I was incapable of distinguishing one from the other and I doubted very much that any of my fellow PSOs would have been much better at it than I was.

Despite these difficulties I did not feel that the forthcoming plebiscite was severely compromised. Even in the best-organised elections there are bound to be some errors and I did not think that ours were likely to be sufficiently numerous to distort the final result. There were other issues that bothered me far more, and the most important of these had to do with the gender of the voters. As I have already observed, the only previous general election in the Southern Cameroons had been based on a property franchise and this had had the effect of denying the vote to the great majority of the women. For the plebiscite, females would now have the same rights as males, but, judging from the attitudes of most of the Southern Cameroonian men I knew, they were not likely to accord the secret ballot or any other democratic privileges to their wives if they could possibly avoid it.

Domestic arrangements varied greatly in the grasslands, sometimes from village to village, but in my own division it was possible to generalise, because almost all the people were patrilineal—that is to say that the inheritance of property ran through the male line. Where this was the case, other aspects of male supremacy were also in evidence, and this applied particularly to marriage.

Typically, a young man wishing to get married would go to work as a trader, or more frequently as a migrant worker on one of the plantations to the south of the territory, until he had put aside enough money for bride price. In the past, bride price had always been paid in salt and iron; previously agreed quantities of salt, formed into cakes and carried with great labour from the coast, and a specified number of bars of iron, hammered into a symbolic representation of a hoe, were presented to the bride's family in return for her hand. By the early 1960s, with the increased availability of ready money, many of these transactions were carried out in cash, but the result was still the same. Once certain ceremonies had been completed and the money paid, the bride was handed over to the husband, and became in many respects the husband's property. She could

only leave him by going back to her own family and persuading them to return the whole of the bride price. Not surprisingly, this rarely happened.

In order to put the marriage on a sound economic footing, it was also necessary for the husband to negotiate a piece of farmland for his wife to cultivate. He would have to apply to the elders in his own village and seek their approval, before clearing a stretch of bush to make a new farm. Once cleared, this land then became the wife's responsibility. First, she had to hoe every inch of soil to ensure a fine tilth, fertilise it with whatever organic matter she could find, plant or sow her crops, then, as growth and weather dictated, water, weed and harvest them. All these processes demanded a tremendous amount of work and, since the cultivated land was often two or three miles from the village, wives frequently spent all day on their farms, leaving home at first light and rarely returning until the late afternoon. If they had babies or toddlers to care for, they carried the children with them to the fields and back again. Around the house, as long as the children were not old enough to help with the chores, their mothers would also have to fetch wood and water for cooking, prepare meals for the family, and generally keep the place clean and tidy.

There was little question of a division of labour between husbands and wives. The wives worked all day and every day on the farm and around the house. If they were craftsmen, the husbands might spend a few hours making things for sale. Otherwise they worked only on the heaviest tasks, such as clearing land from the bush, or at those rare jobs that offered a chance of paid employment. They never helped on the farms, let alone with the housework.

It was easy to see the consequences of this one-sided marital relationship. Once past their first youth, married women always seemed to look miserable, their faces and bodies withered by too many children, too much labour, and too much exposure to the equatorial sun. Their demeanour in public was generally submissive, making way for any passing male on the paths, even if he was empty-handed and they were heavily laden. They looked like what they were, members of an oppressed and down-trodden class of overworked, slightly less than full human beings.

The sole advantage a woman had in her relationship with her husband was that the produce of the land was under her control. If, having fed her family, she could produce a small surplus, she could then sell it in the local markets to anyone who cared to buy and the money would usually end up in her own, and not her husband's pocket. These markets, such as the one where Nigel and I did our own shopping at Wum Three Corner, were held in every small town or large village once every eight days. The women did not dress up for these occasions. In fact their waist cloths and bare legs were often dusty from the long road to market, but they sat sociably together, spreading their wares around them and chatting quietly among themselves. The produce on offer was whatever happened to be in season—a few bunches of plantain or banana, or small piles of coco-yam, or bunches of cassava root, and almost always a bowl full of

cornmeal. The women exuded a quiet satisfaction as they sold their produce for a few pennies at a time, and added the cash to a string of coins that hung between their pendulous breasts.

In early 1961 the currency was still the West African sterling shilling, with each shilling divided into 12 pence. The pennies were large bronze coins with a hole in the middle, which made it easy to string them together. Most things were sold 'penny-penny'. Bananas went for a penny a bunch; a penny's worth of sweet potatoes was a little pile of four or five, and an old cylindrical 50-cigarette tin was the usual measure for a pennyworth of corn meal. Corn meal was one of the staple foods throughout the grasslands and the commonest sound in every village was the steady rhythmic thud of a woman pounding maize cobs in a wooden mortar. Once freed from the husk and broken by the pestle and mortar, the maize was winnowed to get rid of the chaff, and the grains were then ground to powder in a quern, which was really nothing but two stones, a large one beneath, a smaller one above. Women and girls spent hours almost every day, laboriously grinding the meal for the maize porridge that made up the bulk of most meals.

Maize meal also often made up the bulk of a woman's sales on market days, but she would be unlikely to be able to sell very much, simply because it was too laborious to produce. One large bowl of meal, sufficient to make up half a dozen cigarette tinfulls, was the produce of many hours of hard labour, so that at the end of each market day a woman rarely had more than ten pence or a shilling to show for all her hard work. Towards the end of the day she would pack up her basket and do a little shopping on her own account. She might buy salt from one of the traders who came up from the coast, possibly a little meat from a Hausa butcher, but only very rarely would she have saved enough to buy a piece of the colourful wax-printed cotton cloth that the Ibo traders brought in from Nigeria at six shillings a yard, or one of the bright enamel dishes imported from Taiwan and Korea. There was a huge appetite for consumer goods of this kind, but not enough cash to pay for them.

Two or three years before the plebiscite, a minor economic revolution had started to spread through the grasslands, a revolution that brought a significant increase in spending power to the women. For some years there had been a few steel corn mills scattered through a few of the villages. These simple machines were really no more than a scaled-up version of the Spong mincer that used to be clamped to every Englishwoman's kitchen table. The mill had a hopper at the top to receive the maize, a screw thread inside to carry the grain to the grinding blades, and a long handle to provide the motive power. One woman worked the handle, another kept re-charging the hopper with bowls full of maize and a third garnered the steady stream of fine corn meal that emerged from the spout. Working in relays, half a dozen women could grind more corn in a couple of hours than thirty or forty women could achieve in days of labour with stone

querns. What was more, the meal was finer and of better quality than the stone-ground product, and fetched a better price in the market.

The only snag was the price of the machine. At that time a corn mill cost about 400 shillings or twenty pounds—more than any wife could possibly accumulate in a lifetime of hard labour. The solution was the women's cooperative. All the wives in a village, or in a given quarter of a small town, pooled their resources and bought shares in a corn mill as their common property.

These corn-mill societies were a huge success. Not only did they greatly increase the output of meal and relieve the women of countless hours of heavy labour, they also encouraged them to think and act collectively. No longer was grinding corn a solitary chore. It became a social occasion, when the wives could sing songs, exchange gossip and tell each other stories about their idle husbands. The mills also increased their incomes. No longer were they limited to selling a few tins of meal 'penny-penny' at each eight-day market. Now they could deal in bulk. Many women began to earn several shillings a week instead of a few pence.

With increasing economic power and improved cooperation in agricultural matters came an increase in confidence in some of the women's groups. In 1958, a British agricultural adviser tried to persuade women farmers to cultivate along the contours of the hills in the kingdom of Kom, which bordered Bum to the south. (In some reports the British are said to have compelled the women to 'contour plough', but since there was neither a plough nor anything to pull it with in the country, this seems unlikely.) Where slopes are not too steep and the rainfall light, contour cultivation is usually good practice, but it may well not have been suitable for the steep mountainsides and heavy rainfall of Kom. Anyway, it was not a technique to which the women were accustomed, so they protested, and in order to do so they revived an ancient and exclusively female secret society, known as the Anlu.

The protests were not violent, but they still had the power to shock. Crowds of women would assemble in secret, take off their clothes and anoint themselves with oil and cam-wood powder, painting their naked bodies a fearsome red, and then descend upon the District Office, singing and dancing, deliberately obstructing embarrassed officials, and making their feelings very plain to the alarmed authorities. All male gatherings in those days could usually be dispersed by a show of force. Crowds of naked women were much harder to handle. The Anlu protests were a great success and the British agricultural officers abandoned any attempt to make the women cultivate along the contours of the hills.

I was never able to verify exactly what followed. My informants were all male and unwilling to go into detail about a series of events that were generally felt to be embarrassing. I heard several different accounts from different people on different occasions, but the gist of the story was always the same. Some women who had done well from their local corn-mill societies aroused the envy

of their husbands and there were a number of marital quarrels. A man would learn of his wife's new wealth and demand a share of it. If she resisted, he might beat her and take all the money she had earned. Naturally, the wife concerned would then complain to the other women in her cooperative. The corn-mill societies turned to the native courts, but the courts were entirely made up of men, sometimes the same men who were behaving so unjustly towards their wives. So the courts did nothing and the domestic robberies continued. Unable to make their point in any other way, the injured women turned to the same secret Anlu societies that had proved so successful in their protests against the agricultural officers in Kom a year or so before. Even so, things might not have got out of hand if it had not been for one particularly nasty incident in which a man was said to have beaten his wife half to death.

Exactly what followed is impossible to say, but this is the story as it was told to me. A large body of women assembled secretly in the bush close to the man's house. They stripped themselves naked, covered their bodies in oil and camwood powder and worked themselves up into a collective frenzy by dancing and possibly by taking some kind of 'medicine'. It was said that while they danced they also carried the short heavy hoes that they used in the fields. Some of them may also have had their long sharp 'cutlasses'. When they had aroused themselves to a pitch of excitement they burst out of the bush and rampaged through the village where the alleged wife beater lived. He fled his house, but they had already cut off his line of retreat. They caught him and killed him. According to some accounts he died from so many wounds that no single woman could possibly be held accountable. According to others he was hauled up into a tree by his testicles and left hanging there, to die in agony.

I think the death by a thousand cuts version is probably closer to the truth because I was told that the police were unable to find a culprit against whom they could plausibly bring a charge. Of course there were no witnesses to this very public event. Any man of any sense would have kept his head down and none of the women involved would have been willing to give evidence against one another. Eventually, several women are said to have been arrested and taken down to prison in Bamenda, but in the end they had to be released for lack of evidence. Not surprisingly, the story of this collective assassination spread throughout the grasslands, accumulating more and more grisly details as it did so. Some men may have begun to treat their wives with more caution, and some women may have faced up to their husbands with more confidence than before, but any suggestion of female assertiveness was still generally perceived as intolerable by the men of the grasslands.

The influence of the Anlu spread far beyond its point of revival in Kom and in several areas it was a vehicle for protest over local political issues or in disputes between husbands and wives. I do not know how many violent or non-violent incidents there may have been before the so-called Anlu riots came to an abrupt stop, some time late in 1959, and again, all I do know is no more than

hearsay. This is simply the story I was told. A man in the village of Bu, which was at that time in the southern part of my own plebiscite district, beat his wife very badly and feared reprisal from the Anlu. He took his fears to his quarter head, Chief Chu, who was one of the few grasslands men who owned a modern shotgun. The chief charged the gun with buckshot and waited. When the Anlu came charging through Bu in search of their victim Chief Chu stepped out in front of them and opened fire with both barrels. Some said he killed four women and wounded eleven. Others said more.

As I say, I cannot be sure of the truth of this story. All I can say with any certainty is that Chief Chu was regarded as a hero by all the grasslands men I ever talked to about the incident and, when I met the chief myself, some months after this event was said to have taken place, he was presented to me as the man who had put a stop to the Anlu. I remember him as a small man with a rather chirpy manner and a beaming smile, who posed readily for his photograph—not at all my idea of a serial killer. The police evidently took the same view because, as far as I know, no charges were ever brought and no case ever came to court. The Wum District Officer, Jack Griffin, claimed to know nothing of the matter. However, the Anlu societies suddenly went quiet, no doubt suspecting that they would be shot down in cold blood by any man with a gun, without fear of reprisal, if they made any further public protests.

All this had happened, or at least was widely believed to have happened, some months before we Plebiscite Officers even arrived in the country. By that time the women of the grasslands seemed to be as docile and down-trodden as they had ever been. I feared that when it came to polling day for the plebiscite their husbands would tell them which way to vote and that few of them would have the confidence to make their own decisions. In the light of what actually did happen on polling day, I think that in some cases I could not have been more wrong.

7. *polling day*

Around the middle of January 1961, we were issued with instructions for polling day, which was due to take place on February 11th. We had to hold a final round of public meetings to explain the exact process of voting and we were also ordered to supervise the construction of polling booths in major centres of population, built according to precise measurements, in such a way as to prevent even the most persistent of observers from seeing which way other people were voting.

On entering the booth, each prospective voter would be required to show that his or her name was on the electoral register. The presiding officer or his assistant would then tick off the name on the list, mark the voter's hand with a rubber stamp impregnated with indelible ink, and issue him or her with a ballot paper, again marked with an official stamp. The voter would then pass into a second compartment, screened off from the first, where the two boxes, one green, one white, were displayed. There was no requirement for any additional crosses or marks on the ballot paper. He or she simply had to place the slip into the green box to indicate a preference for Nigeria, or the white one for the République du Cameroun.

As with the registration officers at an earlier stage in the process, it was the PSOs responsibility to find officials—two for each polling booth—and train them for the job they had to do. We also had to find two marshals, usually stalwart ex-servicemen, to maintain security and prevent disorder at each station. The various officers would also be responsible for bringing the sealed boxes to a central collecting point at the end of the day, and for making sure that they were not interfered with in any way. Counting would then be the relatively simple process of totting up the number of slips in each box. We PSOs were ourselves to act as returning officers, checking and then reporting the final count for our own districts.

Like every electoral system ever devised there was plenty of room for fraud and manipulation in this process and a great deal depended on the integrity of the officials presiding over the poll. I remember that many people were also anxious to ensure that the polling booths should be impervious to prying eyes. Local building materials for simple structures of this kind, such as raffia and elephant grass, could easily acquire chinks in the walls that would enable those who wished to know to see who was voting in which box. Even if this was only a danger rather than a reality, pressure might still be brought to bear on individual voters.

On 10th February, I made a quick tour of as many polling stations as I could reach. There were a few minor problems. Some of the stations were so flimsy that they had to be stiffened up with additional poles. Others had such thin

walls that I thought there was a real danger that voters could be observed as they dropped their slips into the chosen box and I remember getting the builders to thicken up the cladding. Where there was not time to visit the station myself, I sent word to try and ensure that this weakness was addressed.

For polling day itself I worked out a schedule that would enable me to visit as many of my stations as I could to ensure that all was going well. I forget exactly how many there were, because some of the registration districts were larger than others, but there must have been around twenty-four all told. There were many I could not possibly visit in the time available and I had to limit myself to those close to the road, so I decided to go to the furthest first. This meant taking the ring road eastwards as far as the turn off for Bum, making the short trek to Fonfukka, and then returning, station by station, to end the day at Wum Three Corner.

To start with, all seemed to be going reasonably well, though I remember having, as diplomatically as possible, to eject some of the more prominent big men from the polling stations while the voters were filing in. Although there was no reason why local politicians should not be at the stations to encourage their supporters or to seek an exit poll, I found one or two who had actually entered the booths, where they could easily have been confused with the presiding officers. However, despite a few such problems, I did not have the feeling that anything grossly irregular was going on. There was a sense in which the Cameroonian voters, perhaps even Cameroonian politicians, were protected by their own innocence. Because they had so little experience of the democratic process they also had little experience of devising means of manipulating the result.

The only thing that worried me was the slowness of the whole procedure. The presiding officers and their assistants went about their business with such careful deliberation that each voter took four or five minutes to stick a piece of paper in a box—a process that could easily have been accomplished in less than a minute. On the other hand, I had no wish to speed things up too much, in case this led to allegations of carelessness or negligence. Almost everyone had gone to the poll early in order to have as much of the day free as possible and I watched the long queues outside most of the polling stations with some concern. How long will it take, I wondered, before some of these patient people lose their tempers? I noticed, of course, that it was the women who were usually being made to wait while the men went in first and I have to confess that I was reassured by this. Women, I told myself, are always more patient than men, because they have to be.

So it was not until late in the afternoon, when I finally returned to Wum, that I discovered how complacent I had been. The polling station in the market place, that I had seen early the same morning as a rather smart example of its kind, was now leaning at a drunken angle and had been propped up by poles and branches in several places. Voting had come to a complete halt and there

was a large and restive crowd, consisting entirely of women, angrily surrounding the booth. As I had anticipated, the men had made the women wait until they had all finished voting, even though their wives were anxious to go to the fields and most of the men had nothing pressing to do. In fact most of the women had their hoes and baskets with them, ready for a day's work on the farm. As time went by and polling continued at a snail's pace, some of the wives had grown impatient. Empowered perhaps by the success of the Anlu protests the previous year, an angry group of women had started to dance, and stamp, and wield their hoes, and within a few minutes they had completely trashed the polling station.

The indignant, and possibly rather frightened, presiding officer had closed the poll until the station could be re-erected and now he was keeping it closed because the women would not form an orderly queue and enter the station one at a time. There was no more than an hour or two of daylight left and I could see that some of the women would miss their chance to vote if nothing was done to re-start the process, so without thinking of the possible consequences I started to thrust my way through the crowd of women to reach the presiding officer and tell him to get on with it.

To my utter astonishment I was knocked to the ground almost as soon as I tried to push my way through the throng. I was amazed because the great majority of the women were almost embarrassingly submissive when they met me. Most of them were at least a head shorter than I and, despite the Anlu stories I had heard, it had never occurred to me that they might turn on me. But they did, and they were extremely angry. Clearly, since I was in charge of the plebiscite in their area, it was my fault that they had been kept waiting all day, my fault that they were still waiting now, and my fault that they might never get the chance to vote at all. Within seconds I was rolling at their feet in the classic foetal position while they kicked and pummelled me as hard as they could. Mercifully, they were barefoot, though their horny toes could still deliver a painful kick, and still more mercifully they did not strike me with their hoes. On reflection, I think they were more interested in venting their own anger and frustration than in causing me grievous bodily harm, though I must admit that I was shocked and frightened at the time.

Fortunately for me the two polling marshals at Wum Three Corner were both very large and powerful men. One minute I was grovelling in the mud and the next they had lifted me bodily off the ground, scattering angry women in all directions, and carried me back to my Land Rover. Once there, I wiped off the worst of the mud and did my best to recover my dignity. Several other men came forward to help me and I was quickly able to organise additional polling marshals to bully and cajole the women into forming a line, while I persuaded the presiding officer to speed up the process. Everything settled down remarkably quickly. In a surprisingly short space of time the long line of women

went through the booth and everyone had finished voting by the time we were required to close the station.

Perhaps it was just as well that I was close to the end of my term as a PSO. The story of my being kicked about by a bunch of women must have been the subject of mirth and derision for miles around. But if that was the case, I must say that during my last few days on the job no one ever mocked me, or allowed me to feel humiliated in any way. I found then, as I believe still to be the case today, that Cameroonians are remarkably well-mannered people. Apart from the womens' slanderous songs, which were a kind of licensed satire, I cannot recall anyone setting out to make someone else look ridiculous.

Thinking back on polling day, I still find it surprising that such a high proportion of those registered made the effort to go and vote. In Nigel Wenban-Smith's district of Wum North the total number of people on the registration list was 9,171. The number of people who actually voted was 8,807, which is over 96% of those qualified to do so. Since voters in some parts of this district had to travel many miles over very difficult country to place their ballot, and bearing in mind that some people must have fallen sick or died in the three months between registration and voting, I still find this figure astonishing. Since I do not believe that any serious fiddling went on, this enthusiasm must reflect the seriousness that voters attached to the issue. As elsewhere in the grasslands, the majority of them were women, since so many men were away, trying to earn money on the plantations in the south. The final result for Wum North showed that 7,322 people voted to join the République and only 1,485 elected for Nigeria.

I remember little about the counting of the votes, except that it was orderly and, in my district at least, free of controversy. It took some time for the ballot boxes to be brought in from the more remote polling stations, but in Wum division as a whole there were no reports of anyone trying to meddle with the boxes. Results for the entire territory were announced on 14th February: 233,571 Southern Cameroonians voted in favour of joining the République and only 97,741 for joining Nigeria.

The people of the Northern Cameroons, the strip of mountainous land bordering Nigeria that had also formed part of the British Trust Territory, voted the other way. In a plebiscite held on the same day and under the same overall administration, they elected to join Nigeria. The Northern Cameroons included Fulani and Kirdi groups who were predominantly Muslim. President Ahidjo would have welcomed the northerners into the République because he saw them as an important counterweight to the pagans and Christians in the south of his own country and he was furious at this apparent betrayal. In fact he complained to the United Nations, alleging that the vote had been fixed, and demanding a new plebiscite.

However, nobody complained very loudly about the fate of the Southern Cameroons. The British maintained a skeleton administration pending final

decisions on the terms for reunification, but Premier Foncha and the other leaders of his KNDP party were not in a strong position when it came to bargaining with the leaders of the République. At a conference in Foumban in July 1961 M. Ahidjo laid out his own terms for a new federal constitution, which were confirmed in all important respects at a second conference in Yaoundé, the federal capital, in August of the same year. On 1st October, the Southern Cameroons ceased to exist and took on a new identity as the province of West Cameroun. Over the past 44 years it has not been an altogether happy marriage. Whether it would have been happier if the Anglophone Cameroonians had elected to join Nigeria remains an open question.

Having worked for just six months as a small cog in the United Nations machine in that remote little corner of Africa I can only say that the plebiscite had a profound effect on me. For that short time I carried responsibility for the fair administration of a process of enormous importance to the people with whom I came in contact. That experience awoke me to the consequences of colonial rule. I still believe that Britain should do its best to ensure the lasting welfare of the territories it once ruled. I also retain, to this day, a powerful affection and respect for the people of the Bamenda grasslands and the beautiful country where they live.

Epilogue

Nigel Weban-Smith

Reflecting on his Cameroon experience in retirement, John sought to place it in the context of his later African wanderings, most importantly those entailed in producing, for the BBC, a televised version of Basil Davidson's *History of Africa*. Why not seek out Nigel, who had shared so much of that adventure? And so it came about that two senior citizens, who had not met for 43 years, ventured once again to Cameroon. Three weeks was all too short a time to grasp the immensity of the changes. With Yaoundé as our point of entry and departure, travel to and from Wum stole time away from any deep investigation of life off the main roads. But our harvest of impressions and questions was more invigorating than frustrating. In any case, John envisaged the journey as reconnaissance for an eventual television programme.

With a little help from the *Rough Guide*, full of admonitions about the problems of local travel, we invested heavily and wisely in city education by taxi, as well for some longer trips. Locomotion was least of the problems their resourceful drivers solved. The inter-city bus services in turn provided another course (fortunately not a crash course) in survival skills, as we shared the trials and tribulations of local travellers, quite different from those familiar to us both, as expatriate inhabitants and observers of many parts of independent Africa. Yaoundé to Bamenda; Bamenda to Bafoussam; Bafoussam to Limbe (erstwhile Victoria); Douala to Yaoundé: Garanti Express got us there.

Time, of course, was only loosely linked to money, while brilliant organisation was disguised by the appearance of shambles. Once we had picked a bus out on the city perimeter and paid our fare, some hours would elapse before actual departure. It would after all be silly for a bus to leave unfilled; and 'full' was a concept unfamiliar to people who knew only London's rush-hour. We would pick our places, leave a garment there with equanimity, buy a snack, return in good time as passengers began to embark in greater numbers. With all fixed places filled, dicky seats were unfolded in the aisles and, with these filled, serious loading began of the most ample ladies, one to each row.... Cameroonian men and the two Brits glanced nervously at each other and sighed as the compressibility of finite space was demonstrated anew. Meanwhile, we gradually learned to relax at the fate of our baggage. Magically, it seemed, containers of all shapes and sizes, not to speak of goats, were humped up onto the roof in an order which ensured that those to be unloaded at each intermediate stop could be taken down from the rear. And, in all the hubbub of waiting, loading and unloading, nothing went astray.

Good humour prevailed as we sped along generally good roads and, once we had all shaken down, loud gospel music was silenced for a different entertainment. A smart young man would explain in detail, amid much disparaging banter from the passengers, the marvellous medicine he happened

to have brought, available for free trial by this exceptionally lucky crowd. It would work for tooth-ache, stomach cramps, sore limbs, and—banter now replaced by rapt attention—every, lovingly described, sexual and reproductive disease or inadequacy. Free samples were offered (one surely an industrial solvent), then low-price special offers and, when these ran out, ‘limited’ full-price supplies to meet the pent-up demand for the salesman’s remaining stock. The intermediate halts at roadside markets provide opportunities for al fresco refreshment and relief. And there were several other halts, less agreeable, on each journey, at police check points. Some of these took place at inter-provincial boundaries, judged suitable points for the payment of ‘customs dues’ by the driver, after negotiations out of passenger ear-shot. Others were more in the form of spot checks of travellers, making sure that all had their identity cards or, in our case, passports and yellow fever certificates. The latter (all of which are nowadays phoney and supplied only for such occasions) required especially close examination. What was striking was the unspoken bond of empathy among all the passengers and the collective relief, once the icy stare of Authority turned away.

We paused for a night at Bamenda, in a sad ridge-top hotel, close to an equally sad, veranda-ed building, once the Bamenda Club. Power, such as remained to West Cameroon, had gravitated to the market town below, expanded beyond recognition. Next day, we explored it a little, marvelling at the invasion by mobile phones and internet cafes, but saddened by the neglect of any visible attempt to deal with urban ordure. We also made our first of several encounters with political discontent at more general neglect of the anglophone West, chancing upon a human rights centre, whose protagonists contemplated the formation of a new, independence-seeking party. Ironically, the only bus available to go to Wum that afternoon belonged to Messrs Symbol of Unity. A little late, with 18 passengers for the 16 seats. The Good News was that long-promised improvements to the famous Ring Road had transformed the first part of the journey with well-engineered tarmac, the remainder, though still laterite, being freshly graded. Wum, reached at sunset, was equally unrecognisable. Our first impression was that the Bikers had come to town. Not so. These were the local taxis and we instantly found ourselves separately accommodated, riding pillion, with our bags resting between rider and handlebars. “Where to, sah?” “Morning Star Hotel, please!”

John has recounted the valuable contribution made by Joseph Mebeng, my erstwhile interpreter, during the plebiscite. Contacted by letter, and with help from his daughter Janet, now an established medical clerk complete with the essential mobile phone, he had organised this accommodation. And there he was, now 76 and just a little more wizened than ourselves, to embrace us. Not just that; he had brought a bottle of fresh *mimbo*, palm wine, to celebrate in the same manner as we had previously bidden each other farewell. Janet then appeared, bearing a dish of palm-oil chop, yam-filled and the beef authentically

chewy. Much later, we settled down for the night—to the thump of ultra-loud dance music, whose dying away merged smoothly into the crescendo of dawn cock crowing. John was closest and suffered most. But the next day was all that we could wish, with a taxi ride to our original lakeside quarters (light motorcycles come into their own on roads that have turned into grassy footpaths) and, far more significant, a chance meeting in the street with Patrick Mbeng, eldest son of the late Fon of Bum. Further chance encounters were soon converted into the hire of Hassan's clapped-out Daihatsu to take us to Weh next day and his brother Sunday to take us—and Patrick—on the following day to Bum and Nyos. Plans made, we explored the market (huge, compared to the simple stalls of 1961) and sought our old house, finally identified amid what had become Wum's inner suburbs. Those next two days were the most evocative and educational of the whole visit.

Squeezed into the Daihatsu with three other passengers and 1,000 kgs of cement, we reached Weh and, eventually, Joseph's home patch in Keghe Quarter. Happily for us, things were not quite ready, allowing time for several *mimbos* and a leisurely examination of Joseph's collection of early missionary photographs, from which we were invited to select a representative sample (he remained a pastor in the Lutheran church of the Basel Mission and, in the 1980s, had been taken to visit their headquarters). It was then time to repay his politeness by absenting ourselves for a few more hours. Our return to Wum involved the death and resurrection of the Daihatsu's engine, and also refuelling at the petrol station, where all the siphoning was started by human suction. Then, to fill time, a courtesy call on the head of the local administration, the Senior Divisional Officer—which proved a Good Move. Evidently excited by our interest, he suggested that we also pay a call on the Mayor, accomplished the same afternoon. We caught up with him in the middle of a private meeting of his political party, the Social Democratic Front. Business was halted for us to be whisked, first, onto the dais for public introduction and short speeches and, second, his meeting abandoned, to a nearby bar for much beer and eager converse with a succession of local worthies. Consensus was soon reached on the uselessness of Europe's Common Agricultural Policy.

Meanwhile, we had returned to Weh for lunch and formal exchanges of gifts. As well as Mrs Mebeng, there were the two surviving members of the team of carriers with whom Joseph and I had traversed Fungom. They were clad, like Joseph, in the now-old-fashioned embroidered smocks of senior citizens. After lunch of the usual battle-hardened chicken, there followed a comprehensive photo session, at which we found ourselves confronting our colonialist nostalgia for the old days: how had those lovely mud-daubed, raffia-framed, leaky-thatched huts been replaced by these plain structures of sun-dried brick and corrugated iron? Easy. The wages of plebiscite paydays had been invested solidly, not in frivolous consumption. As we left, Joseph muttered darkly "I haven't finished with you yet" and stuffed an unidentified package into my

rucksack. Later inspection revealed it to be the unconsumed remains of the chicken. But that was not what his 'threat' meant. When the time came later to make our farewells, Joseph and Janet came bearing bottles of dried nuts to eat on our journey, together with embroidered baskets, two for us and two for our wives, inviting them to visit Weh. It was not easy to say goodbye.

The day after our visit to Weh, Fonfukka and Nyos beckoned. They lay eastward along the old Ring Road; and the bad news was that this road remained bad and, at key river crossings, impassable. Only Sunday Mustapha ventured along it at intervals, having negotiated an arrangement to drive his robust four-wheel drive pick-up through the fields of a peasant in the dry season. All the same, he brought an essential crew of pushers to help with various tricky hill-top sections. At Fonfukka, vastly expanded, of course, we again paid respects to the local Divisional Officer and, thanks to the personal knowledge of John and documents available to Patrick, helped him (a Francophone from eastern Cameroon) understand the finer points of the longstanding chiefly succession problem he had been appointed to sort out. That deserved a few beers and a sharing with the locals of John's freshly printed collection of photos of people he had met there all those years ago. Much pleasure all round and special shrieks of delight from one woman who found and claimed a portrait of her husband as a young man. Before leaving, we learned that we would after all be able to meet the new Fon, who was not up the mountain, but at the hamlet of Kimbi, down the valley. He and local chiefly subordinates were attending a 'celebration', that is to say a funeral. Ushered into the dark hut in which all were assembled, we paid our respects in a suitably formal manner (John avoiding the solecism which had attended his first meeting with the old Fon), with an elder translating John's remarks into the local dialect and the Fon's replies into English. But this stilted palaver soon dissolved into an intensive session of mutual photography, accompanied by warm and free discussion with the Fon in his fluent English. As in the old days, we were sent on our way with a gift of a live fowl.

And so to Nyos. The village lay in what had been 'my' area of Fungom. So I had known its crater lake and had explained the plebiscite to its villagers—and had been personally distressed by the news of the death by asphyxiation of most of them in the 1986 catastrophe. This time, we were able to inspect the floating platform installed at the centre of the lake, with its device to allow continuous release of the high-pressure carbon dioxide accumulating from the rotting vegetation borne continuously into its depths (Europeans familiar with the water spout on Lake Geneva will have some idea of the force of this jet of gas and water). I should record, however, that local opinion, as expressed by those in charge of the gas extraction device, dismissed the chemical explanation for the disaster in favour of a conspiracy theory: the explosion had resulted from an Israeli-American neutron bomb experiment which went wrong (John video-recorded this explanation).

After bumping our way back to the Morning Star Hotel for showers, we taxied forth for dinner with the Mayor, his father and friends. We ate the delicious local chicken, yam paste and a vegetable new to us, huckleberry leaves, local-style, without cutlery; the conversation turned to the usual topic: continued yearning for separation, given the Yaoundé Government's less than benign neglect of the west. We heard how initially brutal intervention by the gendarmerie had been replaced by the more insidious failure to invest in any productive enterprise; also how the West's comparative advantage of the English language had been undermined. Westerners had eagerly gone for bilingualism, and easterners too had come to the west to learn the language; but western names gave their origins away and eastern francophones got all the jobs. The Mayor suggested that frustration among the young had now reached worrying levels. We pointed out that, had the plebiscite gone the other way, this part of Cameroon could scarcely have avoided embroilment in Nigeria's civil war. Yet the most important impression we took away was of the pleasure of being able to have so uninhibited and friendly a discussion: the generosity differed not at all from what we had known so well, but the sophistication of the discourse was a great credit to educational advances made during a single generation of independence. We wondered whether radio had played a part—the Mayor's father, a retired pastor, could only (if we had closed our eyes) have been Desmond Tutu speaking.

John had promised himself the anthropological treat of a visit to Foumban, a fascinating diversion for us both from our main purpose, as well as a further opportunity to appreciate change and continuities. Forested conservation areas bore all too much evidence of infiltration by Fulani cattle drovers, symptomatic of the growing political antagonism between pastoralists and farmers, though only the faint echo of the vicious drought-induced struggles in the wider Sahelian region. At Bafoussam, the competition among unemployed youths for our custom nearly turned nasty, until John stilled the uproar with a stentorian "SILENCE!!" And, at Foumban, billed (rightly) as a major tourist attraction, we found ourselves the only foreigners and the Hotel Beauregard empty and devoid of running water. The staff, however, could not have been friendlier—as was demonstrated conclusively on our departure: I left behind the small bag containing all my documents and money. Our plan had been to go by taxi only as far as the remote bus depot, but having concluded a deal with the driver to take us all the way to Bafoussam, we carried on for some way before discovering the lapse. Back at the bus station was a distraught member of the hotel staff, who had been dispatched there with my bag, the importance of which had been recognised from its contents. Our luck continued, with a quick departure from Bafoussam in a bus going direct to Limbe. There we allowed ourselves the luxury of two nights of hot and cold water, plus air-conditioning, in the Atlantic Beach Hotel. Open air fish suppers with locals on the beach; distant views of offshore oil rigs to the west; meanders around the botanical gardens; a visit to

the rehabilitation centre for apes rescued from illicit capture—these defined the indicators of change, as did a general sleepiness, in contrast to the bustle which had marked the town when it was still Victoria, the Protectorate's commercial centre.

It remained only to revisit Buea, now harbouring a university. The Schloss, the never-visited domain of the Cameroon President, we glimpsed only from a distance, but we were determined to renew acquaintance with the Mountain Lodge. There it was, deserted, closed, but at least free of the habitual mist. Our close inspection was soon threatened by the brusque intervention of soldiers guarding the Schloss. Once we had explained ourselves, however, scowls turned to smiles—and a photograph taken by the Corporal of the pair of us clutching an empty champagne bottle picked up from the debris. What we failed to achieve, despite a prolonged search of the University, was a hoped-for meeting there with Shirley Ardener, social anthropologist with long-standing friendships in Cameroon, who encouraged John to write his memoir; luckily, though, she was in Limbe that day and available for a most enjoyable lunch, as well as the provision of invaluable advice on accommodation in Douala, en route back to Yaoundé and England.

We never did see cloud-swathed Mount Cameroon, whose guardian spirits remain, no doubt, unmoved by any of the changes before or since the Plebiscite. Nor did we manage, with the resumption of our separate lives and, worse, the onset of John's illness, to reflect together on our fresh experiences. What follows is a necessarily speculative attempt to fill that void. It draws on recollection of John's reactions to particular events; and it also seeks to take account of John's comments (see above) written a couple of years before the return visit, but not amended subsequent to it. There are two other main sources of evidence: our itinerary, chosen by John. He was keen to see Yaoundé for two main reasons—to see how the new Cameroon looked from that perspective and to learn more about the country's cultural history from the important museum collections; and he was determined to visit Foumban as a renowned centre of the grasslands culture. For the rest, our tour aimed to retrace as much as possible of the journeys we had made a generation earlier, though we both realised that we were unlikely to have the chance of getting to villages off the roads—the places that had most vividly caught our youthful imaginations.

Putting to one side John's cultural visits, whose purpose was essentially to deepen his existing knowledge, one underlying shared objective was to discover for ourselves how strongly separatist desires ran in West Cameroon (we had read in the European press that this issue was by no means dead). For me, no less than for John, 'enlightenment' tours had been dominated by ceaseless complaints at the absence of simple independence as a plebiscite option. I think it would be fair to say that we felt during our return visit that the issue could be contained, but that it could also, much more profitably, be overcome by more

thorough and active efforts on the part of the central Government. Enlightened self-interest, given the offshore oil deposits on the border with Nigeria, required no less; and perhaps the long-delayed revival of the grasslands ring road was a first indicator of more positive attitudes in Yaoundé. Yet, I think John also felt that his views about the inadequate preparation and summary imposition of the plebiscite had been vindicated by what our interlocutors had to say.

Our journeyings and visits provided a pretty good conspectus of the changed living conditions. John enjoyed as much as I the exuberance and colour of the many markets we visited, using me as a decoy to obtain photographs of the effects of free-for-all market conditions. Apart from the vast increase in scale, there were also some impressive changes in the types of goods on offer. Most striking was the arrival of cell phones. *Everyone* seemed to own one! But, as we discovered, there were some very decrepit devices being sold and few were designed to last; we learned that, as in the car trade, provenance was highly dubious. All the same, it became clear that the central Government had given priority to the establishment of a generally effective network, eliminating the need for vulnerable wired phone systems. Likewise, Internet cafes were burgeoning, if not yet ubiquitous. Yet one thing had not changed: just as in the old days, traders were having a hard time selling their wares. Whether economic survival was harder or easier, life less or more fulfilling, who could tell? Perhaps Joseph's experiences are worth recalling. Before our visit, he had written to ask my help in getting treatment for his cataracts. I duly made some contacts through Sight Savers International and told him what was on offer within reasonable reach "Oh," he said, "I went to see them and they told me my sight was just fine." This was indeed the case; it was just that, as we well knew, his sight as a young man had been truly phenomenal. The point was that a good hospital was now within a modest day's journey. Joseph had also told me beforehand how law and order had broken down, giving the example of one of his sons, who had moved to Douala and got himself into trouble with the police. His general drift was that Cameroon had gone to the dogs, just as we old codgers knew had happened in Britain.

John was understandably depressed by the abuses of political power by its holders in independent Africa. He looked to the immemorial steadfastness of African women as a source of salvation for the continent, apparently seeing the required strength in their uncomplaining tolerance of agricultural and domestic burdens. Many of today's commentators also look to African women as providing the key to real development, but through education and greater social equality rather by inherent virtue. We did not really do much to seek the views of the women we encountered in our 2004 journey, but not a few of John's photographs, whether intentionally or not, seemed to focus on evidence of their current aspirations—with hairdressing, lingerie, furnishing and even sexual pleasure featuring among the themes designed to attract their attention in market places. To my mind there is no doubt that women in Africa have in

general a harder time than the men and that, especially in the rural areas, they have demonstrated an astonishing resilience and fortitude, but it does not follow that they would have been able to provide a surer political insight at the time of the plebiscite or even today. In Africa, as elsewhere, a more effective political voice for women requires tolerance of that input from the male population—and that is a long and stony road everywhere, with many a consumerist diversion on the way. Unfortunately, we can never know to what extent John's pre-visit view may have been modified by his observations during the trip.

This comment leads to another uncertainty. In asking 'what this is all about' should we take literally John's linkage of his plebiscite experience and his disappointment with the outcome of political emancipation? My feeling—it can be no more than that—is that this linkage was more of a literary device, and an inadequate one, because the discussion of his later experiences remained uncompleted. The part of the Southern Cameroons in which we worked in 1960–61 was a remote part of a small section of the re-united Cameroon. It never was a discrete Garden of Eden. Once a geographically protected refuge for people displaced through prior disruptions (hence the multiplicity of languages), it had been the edge of a single German colony before becoming the edge of an area of British administration. Arguably, that period, however neglectful, proved to be the most tranquil so far experienced. Certainly, the Wum area was not typical even of the Southern Cameroons; and the arguments for and against postponing a decision on its political future would have greater validity if they were based on attitudes in the more developed urban centres further south. Others are better placed than I to deliberate over the actual determinants of policy regarding the future of the two parts of Cameroon under British Trusteeship, but in the free-for-all of speculation about the might-have-been of an independent Southern Cameroons, I would not be confident of a better outcome than the one we observed. Continued comparative neglect—essentially what West Cameroon has suffered—could have been a blessing in disguise.

What we observed was a land where much of the traditional social structure survived and where the environment was much less degraded than in many parts of Africa, not least in eastern Cameroon. We looked with alarm at areas of forest reserve in which fires raged; but we could still see the streams and rivers running towards the *end* of the dry season. We saw that the dangers of AIDS and precautions against its spread were being advertised in every township and village, but apparently more as a timely warning than as evidence of a scourge that had already caused local devastation. We saw and heard more signs of interest in the world beyond Cameroon, but not evidence that its great politico-ideological struggles were undermining the commonplace preoccupations of West Cameroonians. It takes more than a single Osama bin Laden T-shirt (we saw one in Kimbi) to make a revolution. And, while we wondered at the significance of posters (laid out for sale in Bamenda market) of the effects of

terrorist bombings in Baghdad and Nairobi, there was no rush to buy them. We were intrigued by seeing what looked like the demolition of a complete hill on Yaoundé's outskirts to make way for a new United States embassy; and we speculated shamelessly about the identity of a mysteriously taciturn North American who offered us a lift near Wum, cross-examining us closely on our visit, but singularly unwilling to talk about the work of the International Linguistic Institute, whose minibus conveyed him. Perhaps we failed to spot undercurrents obvious to closer observers of the scene. On the other hand, it could be that Cameroon, including that small part of West Cameroon which had so delighted us, is better-placed than other parts of Africa to emerge from the tempestuous birth pangs of independence into a progressively calmer future.

If only John and I could have debated whether the Cameroon glass was half-full (my view) or half-empty (his)! It may be many decades before the matter is settled. What remains indisputable is that those six months in the Southern Cameroons provided two—and probably many more—of the young men sent to conduct the plebiscite with an enriching and unforgettable experience. And the memory of their doings does not appear to have left scars on those they dealt with. Was it all really so arrogant? Empire is of its nature arrogant, but this exercise was surely a rather thorough attempt to free an uncertain political process of distortions by maladministration? Arguably, it would be difficult to find a better blend of energy, intelligence and idealism than in such a group of young graduates. John was himself a prime example.

**Southern Cameroons
Plebiscite, 1961**

**THE TWO
ALTERNATIVES**

PRINTED BY AUTHORITY

SOUTHERN CAMEROONS PLEBISCITE

THE CONSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION AT THE PLEBISCITE

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations General Assembly, after hearing the statement made by the representative of the Administering Authority, by the Premier of the Southern Cameroons and by the leader of the opposition in the Southern Cameroons House of Assembly, by Resolution 1352 (XIV) of 16th October, 1959, decided that arrangements should be made for a plebiscite to be held in the Southern Cameroons and that the two questions to be put at the plebiscite should be :—

- (a) Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Federation of Nigeria ?
- (b) Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Republic of Cameroun ?

On 31st May, 1960, the United Nations Trusteeship Council, by Resolution 2013 (XXVI), requested the Administering Authority to take steps, in consultation with the Authorities concerned, to ensure that the people of the Territory are fully informed, before the plebiscite, of the constitutional arrangements which would have to be made, at the appropriate time, for the implementation of the decision at the plebiscite.

This booklet is being produced in pursuance of the Trusteeship Council Resolution referred to above and will be used to explain to the public of the Southern Cameroons the constitutional implications of the two plebiscite choices.

The implications of joining the Federation of Nigeria have been made clear in undertakings given by Nigerian Ministers. Trusteeship would be terminated at an early date and the Southern Cameroons would join the Federation with the status of a fully self-governing Region equal in all respects with the other Regions in an independent Nigeria. The Federation of Nigeria already has a constitution which provides for regional Governments and it is, therefore, possible to set out in detail the constitutional arrangements that would be made if the plebiscite decision is in favour of the first alternative: these arrangements will be found on pages 7 to 12 below.

Insofar as the implications of joining the independent Republic of the Cameroun are concerned, Mr Foncha, in his capacity as leader of the political party advocating joining the independent

Republic of Cameroun, has consulted directly with the President of the Republic of the Cameroun on the terms upon which the Southern Cameroons might be united with the Republic if the result of the plebiscite should be in favour of such a course. Her Majesty's Government, as Administering Authority, have on several occasions enjoined upon those concerned the need for clarification of these terms. A number of meetings have taken place in Yaoundé, Douala and Buea at which Mr Foncha and his colleagues have discussed this question with President Ahidjo and members of his Government. These meetings have resulted in two joint communiques which are reproduced in full on pages 13 to 15, and which the Government of the Republic of Cameroun, in response to a formal request by Her Majesty's Government have authorised for publication.

In November, 1960, the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Mr. Iain Macleod) received, at the request of Mr. Foncha, a delegation representing the government and other parties in the Southern Cameroons. The main matter discussed at the talks was the implication of the second choice in the plebiscite. The Secretary of State said that in the view of Her Majesty's Government, the United Nations in adopting the two alternatives of joining Nigeria or the Cameroun Republic, clearly ruled out a period of continuing Trusteeship or separate independence for the Southern Cameroons. In Her Majesty's Government's view, therefore, if the plebiscite goes in favour of the Cameroun Republic, arrangements would have to be made for the early termination of Trusteeship. The Secretary of State had noted that the Premier of the Southern Cameroons had ascertained from the President of the Cameroun Republic that a Federal form of constitution would be acceptable. The following interpretation was proposed as being consistent with the second question, it being understood that the association of the United Nations with the post-plebiscite conference mentioned in the text below would be subject to its agreement :—

“A vote for attaining independence by joining the Republic would mean that, by an early date to be decided by the United Nations after consultation with the Governments of the Southern Cameroons, the Cameroun Republic and the United Kingdom as Administering Authority, the Southern Cameroons and the Cameroun Republic would unite in a Federal United Cameroun Republic. The arrangements would be worked out after the plebiscite by a conference consisting of representative delegations of equal status from the Republic and the Southern Cameroons. The United Nations and the United Kingdom would also be associated with this conference. During the short period while the arrangements for transfer were being made the United Kingdom would of course be ready to continue to fulfil their responsibilities under the Trusteeship Agreement.”

The President of the Republic of Cameroun and Mr. Foncha have endorsed the interpretation of the second plebiscite question set out above in the terms of the communique quoted on page 15.

The Republic of Cameroun at the present time has a unitary form of constitution. A federal form of constitution for the Federal United Republic of Cameroun would be drawn up after the plebiscite and when it is known what states will form the Federation. The communiques quoted in pages 13 to 15 set out in outline the terms and conditions, as agreed by Mr Foncha and President Ahidjo and endorsed by the Government of the Republic of Cameroun, upon which the Southern Cameroons would join the Republic in the event of the vote in the plebiscite being in favour of such a course.

It will be observed from a study of the statements on pages 7 to 15 that there are a number of matters, arrangements for which would fall to be made after the plebiscite.

In the arrangements which have been made for the plebiscite, GREEN is the colour which has been allocated to the first alternative on which a vote can be cast, namely, for achieving independence by joining the independent Federation of Nigeria; and WHITE is the colour which has been allocated to the second alternative on which a vote can be cast, namely, for achieving independence by joining the independent Republic of Cameroun. The ballot boxes to be used in the plebiscite will be painted GREEN and WHITE respectively.

The day fixed for the plebiscite is Saturday, 11th February, 1961.

CONSTITUTIONAL POSITION OF THE SOUTHERN CAMEROONS IN THE EVENT OF IT ELECTING TO BECOME A PART OF THE FEDERATION OF NIGERIA

I

Undertaking of the Nigerian Governments

In paragraph 70 of the Report by the Resumed Nigeria Constitutional Conference held in London in 1958 it was stated:

"The Conference confirmed that, if this proved to be the wish of the people of the Territory, Nigeria would welcome the Southern Cameroons as part of the Federation with the status of a full self-governing Region equal in all respects with the other Regions in an independent Nigeria".

This was confirmed at the Constitutional discussions between Nigerian Ministers and Ministers of the United Kingdom which were held in London in May, 1960. In the final communique issued after these discussions it was stated :

"There was an exchange of views on the Cameroons under British Trusteeship which in accordance with the resolution of the United Nations would be separated from Nigeria when Nigeria became independent. It was noted that the questions in the plebiscites to be held early in 1961 posed a choice between joining Nigeria or joining the Republic of Cameroun. It was agreed that if the Southern Cameroons joined Nigeria it would, as stated in paragraph 70 of the 1958 Conference report, be with the status of a full self-governing Region equal in all respects with the other Regions. It was hoped to ascertain from the government of the Republic of the Cameroun the terms on which the Northern and/or Southern Cameroons would enter the Republic".

II

The Federation of Nigeria would consist of the Regions of Northern Nigeria (including the Northern Cameroons if it decided to join the Federation), Western Nigeria, Eastern Nigeria, the Federal Territory of Lagos and the Region of the Southern Cameroons.

The Federation and each of its component Regions is a parliamentary democracy with ministerial councils responsible to the legislatures and with a Governor-General (in the case of the Federation) or a Governor (in the case of a Region) as Her Majesty's Representative.

III

Federal Structure

The Federal Parliament consists of a Senate and a House of Representatives. The Senate consists of twelve senators from each Region, four from the Federal Territory of Lagos and four nominated by the Governor-General on the advice of the Federal Prime Minister. The Southern Cameroons would thus have twelve senators. The House of Representatives would consist of 320 directly elected members (including the Northern Cameroons if it decided to join the Federation) the number of members from each Region being based on the proportion the population of that Region bears to the total population of the Federation. On this basis the Southern Cameroons would have eight members in the Federal House of Representatives.

The Governor-General appoints as Prime Minister of the Federation a member of the House of Representatives who appears likely to command the support of a majority of the members of that House. The other ministers are appointed in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister from among the members of the Senate and House of Representatives.

The principal matters in which only the Federal Parliament can legislate (*i.e.*, reserved *exclusively* to it) include :

- Aviation and meteorology
- External borrowing, currency and coinage, exchange control
- Control of Capital issues
- Copyright
- Customs and excise, including export duties
- Defence and Police (other than local government police)
- Certain Higher Educational Institutions
- External affairs
- External trade
- Immigration and emigration
- Incorporation and regulation of companies
- Insurance (other than purely intra-regional)
- Shipping and navigation
- Mines and minerals, including oil and natural gas
- Naval, military and air forces
- Nuclear energy
- Patents and trademarks
- Posts, telegraphs and telephones
- Railways
- Trunk roads
- Company taxes and sales taxes
- Wireless broadcasting and television

In certain matters the Federal and Regional legislatures have *concurrent* authority, *i.e.*, they have equal right to initiate legislation, but if a Regional law is inconsistent with Federal law the Regional

law is void to the extent of the inconsistency. The principal concurrent subjects include :

- Antiquities
- Arms and ammunition
- Bankruptcy
- Census
- Commercial and industrial monopolies, combines and trusts
- Higher Education (other than the institutions in the Exclusive list)
- Industrial development
- Labour, industrial relations
- National monuments and parks
- Prisons
- Professional Qualifications
- Public safety and public order
- Scientific and industrial research
- Surveys and statistics
- Tourism
- Traffic on Federal trunk roads
- Water power

All *residual* matters, i.e., those which are not specified as exclusive or concurrent, would come within the sole authority of the Southern Cameroons Government.

The Federal Supreme Court is the court of appeal from the High Courts of the Regions and Lagos. It has no original jurisdiction except in disputes between the Federation and a Region or between Regions, and in questions as to the interpretation of the Federal and Regional Constitutions.

IV

Regional Structure

If the Southern Cameroons elected to join the Federation of Nigeria it would become a full self-governing region within the Federation in all respects equal to and having the same powers as the other Regions. In particular, it would have :

- (a) A Governor, who, as Her Majesty's Representative, would be bound to act in accordance with the advice of his ministers except in respect of a limited number of topics, e.g. dissolution of parliament, appointment of the Premier.
- (b) A legislature consisting of a House of Assembly elected by universal adult suffrage and a House of Chiefs containing not less than eighteen chiefs selected in accordance with special regulations. The power of the legislature to make laws would be exercised by bills passed by both Houses. A bill (other than a money bill, i.e., one involving financial measures) may originate in

either House, but a money bill may originate only in the House of Assembly. The House of Chiefs would have a delaying power only.

The legislature would be empowered to legislate on all concurrent matters and on all matters not specified as concurrent or exclusive. These residual subjects would include primary and secondary education, agriculture, forestry, veterinary services, co-operatives, local government, land, medical services, administration of justice and roads (other than Federal trunk roads). The legislature would be empowered to pass its own budget and to raise revenue for all matters within its competence.

- (c) An Executive Council consisting of a Premier appointed by the Governor and other Ministers appointed on the recommendation of the Premier. The Premier would be the person who appeared likely to command a majority among the members of the House of Assembly. The Premier and other Ministers would be members of the House of Assembly but at least two of the Ministers would be members of the House of Chiefs. The Executive Council would be responsible for the executive government of the Southern Cameroons.
- (d) A High Court of the Southern Cameroons with full jurisdiction in Civil and Criminal matters. The Southern Cameroons would also have its own system of Magistrates Courts and Customary Courts.
- (e) A Southern Cameroons Public Service, distinct and separate from the other public services in the Federation. The Public Service would be controlled by a Southern Cameroons Public Service Commission responsible to the Southern Cameroons Government and pensions of retired officers of this Public Service would be a charge on Southern Cameroons funds.

The Southern Cameroons Government would advance to the status of a full self-governing Region in a sovereign Federation equal in all respects with the other Regions and its Government would consequently be supreme in all matters within its competence. The Federal Government would have no overriding powers in such matters, except that if the Federal Government and the Southern Cameroons Government were both to legislate on a subject in the *Concurrent list* the Federal law would, in the event of inconsistency, prevail.

V

The following are the provisions for the amendment of the Constitution :

- (a) Federal Constitution —
 - (i) Entrenched provisions : amendment requires a two-thirds majority of all the members in each House of

the Federal Parliament and the concurrence, by simple majority, of each House of the Legislatures of at least two Regions. (The entrenched provisions include such matters as human rights, the operation of regional constitutions, the Federal Parliament and its exercise of legislative power, the Executive's powers, judicial and police affairs, public funds, the public service and the Exclusive and Concurrent legislative lists).

- (ii) Ordinary provisions : amendment requires a two-thirds majority of all the members of each House of the Federal Parliament.
- (b) Southern Cameroons (Regional) Constitution—Amendment would require a two-thirds majority of each House and, in the case of entrenched provisions, would also require the concurrence of the Federal Parliament.

VI

Miscellaneous Provisions

Arrangements in respect of the following subjects would be broadly on the same lines as those obtaining before October 1st, 1960 :

Defence National defence is assured by the Federal armed forces recruited from all parts of the Federation, which would include the Southern Cameroons.

Police The Federation is policed by a federal police force recruited from all parts of the Federation, which would include the Southern Cameroons.

Local Government would continue as at present.

The Legal System would continue as at present. There would be magistrates' and customary courts and a High Court presided over by a Chief Justice. Appeals from the High Court would be heard by the Federal Supreme Court which would hold sessions as necessary in the Southern Cameroons. Appeals from the Federal Supreme Court would go to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.

Currency The present currency would continue to be used.

Education The following higher educational institutions are a Federal responsibility :

- The University College at Ibadan
- The University College Teaching Hospital
- The Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology
- The West African Institute of Social and Economic Research
- The Pharmacy School at Yaba
- The Forestry School at Ibadan
- The Veterinary School at Vom

Other higher education is a concurrent responsibility and the Southern Cameroons would consequently be able to found institutions for higher education itself; the remainder of educational matters is an entirely Regional responsibility.

Official Language The language of the legislature, the Courts and the administration would be the English language.

Position of Native Rulers Chiefs recognised by native law and custom as the traditional rulers would be recognised by the Federal and Regional Governments as provided by existing legislation and their representation secured in the House of Chiefs.

Federal Public Service The Federal Public Service is open to citizens of all Regions, which would include the Southern Cameroons. There are at the present time thirty-eight Departments and services staffed by members of the Federal Public Service, opportunities for advancement in which are equal for all members whatever their Region of origin. The pensions of Federal officers are a charge on Federal funds.

Internal Tariffs There would be no internal tariffs (*i.e.*, duties on the internal movement of goods) and internal trade would be free.

Revenue Federal revenue is raised principally from the proceeds of Customs and Excise, import and export duties, and sale taxes on certain commodities. Part of this revenue goes into a pool of funds which is shared out on an agreed basis amongst all the Regions, which would include the Southern Cameroons.

Regional taxes are collected in such manner as the legislature may provide, *e.g.*, Income Tax, direct taxation.

Membership of the British Commonwealth The Federation is a sovereign independent member of the Commonwealth and by joining the Federation the Southern Cameroons would enjoy all the benefits of membership of the Commonwealth; being entitled amongst other things to the preferential treatment for its exports as at present enjoyed and to other sources of aid available to Commonwealth members.

Roads Trunk roads and the expansion of trunk roads (but not the traffic on them) would be an exclusively Federal responsibility to be paid for out of federal funds. Other roads would be constructed and maintained from regional funds.

Human Rights Fundamental human rights (such as protection against deprivation of life and liberty, freedom from discrimination, freedom of conscience, expression and movement, the right of recourse to the courts and of a fair hearing or trial) are written into the Federal Constitution and laws which contravene them will not be enforced by the courts. All these constitutional provisions covering fundamental rights are entrenched.

**CONSTITUTIONAL POSITION OF THE SOUTHERN
CAMEROONS IN THE EVENT OF IT ELECTING TO
BECOME A PART OF THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROUN**

COMMUNIQUE

CONSIDERING that in the application of the Republic at the 14th Session of the United Nations a plebiscite is to be organised in February 1961 to allow the people of the Southern Cameroons under British Trusteeship and the people of the Northern Cameroons under British Trusteeship to declare whether they wish to join the Federation of Nigeria or to be united with the Cameroun Republic,

CONSIDERING that in the event of the result of this plebiscite being in favour of Reunification the application of this reunification on a federal basis allowing for the particular conditions of each group, could not be automatic but gradual,

CONSIDERING that the representatives of the Cameroun Republic and of the Government Party of the Southern Cameroons vigorously reaffirm the desire of their peoples to be reunited in one Nation,

CONSIDERING that the political heads have already met twice to examine the broad outlines of the Constitution of the two Federated States, they have, at the conclusion of their third meeting of the 10, 11, 12 and 13th October, 1960, decided to adopt the broad outlines of the Constitution which they will adopt in the event of the plebiscite vote being favourable to them.

JOINT DECLARATION

The representatives of the Cameroun Republic and the Government Party of the Southern Cameroons under British Trusteeship met for the third time to continue their discussions on the projected Constitution which would govern the reunified Cameroun.

At the conclusion of these talks, the Hon. J. N. Foncha, Prime Minister of the Southern Cameroons, His Excellency M. Ahmadou AHIDJO, President of the Cameroun Republic, and M. Charles ASSALE, Prime Minister and Head of the Cameroun Government,

STATE:

1. that they wish to use every available means to bring to a successful conclusion the task of national reunification which they have set themselves;
2. that in no case will the United Cameroun be a part either of the French Community or the British Commonwealth;

3. that they wish to create a Federal State whose institutions could be broadly outlined as follows:

The Federal United Cameroun Republic will be a democratic state. It will have its motto, its anthem and its flag. The nationals of the federated states will enjoy Camerounian nationality. The Federal State in the first stage will have power to deal with matters listed below as a minimum:

- public freedoms
- nationality
- national defence
- foreign affairs
- higher education
- immigration and emigration
- federal budget
- posts and telecommunications

A list of powers which would fall within the competence of the Federal Government in the second stage will be set out in the Constitution.

The Federal Authorities will be composed of:

- a Federal Executive headed by the President of the Republic, Chief of the Federal State,
- Federal legislature consisting of a Federal Legislative Assembly and a Federal Senate.

Certain federal laws will only be enacted in such a way that no measures contrary to the interest of one State will be imposed upon it by the majority (system of second reading with a qualified majority).

In the event of a conflict of laws between the Federal State and the Federated States, the federal law will prevail.

In non-federal matters, the Authorities of each of the Federated States will have exclusive competence.

Each of the Federated States will be ruled by a Government and will have a Legislative Assembly.

A federal Court of Justice will have as its purpose to unify judicial systems and to act as the Highest Court of Appeal of the Federal State.

Federal services will be established to carry out federal Administration.

Legislation (or systems of legislation in force) will remain valid until the enactment of federal legislation.

4. The Federation will be created by the Cameroun Republic and the Southern Cameroons under British Trusteeship. The two parties hope that the Northern Cameroons under British Trusteeship will also enter into this federation, either as a separate State, or as a part of the Cameroons at present under British Trusteeship.

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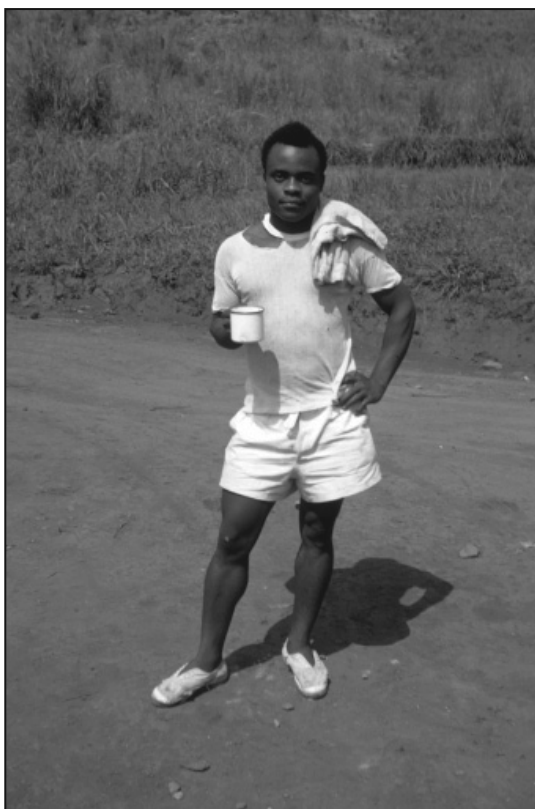
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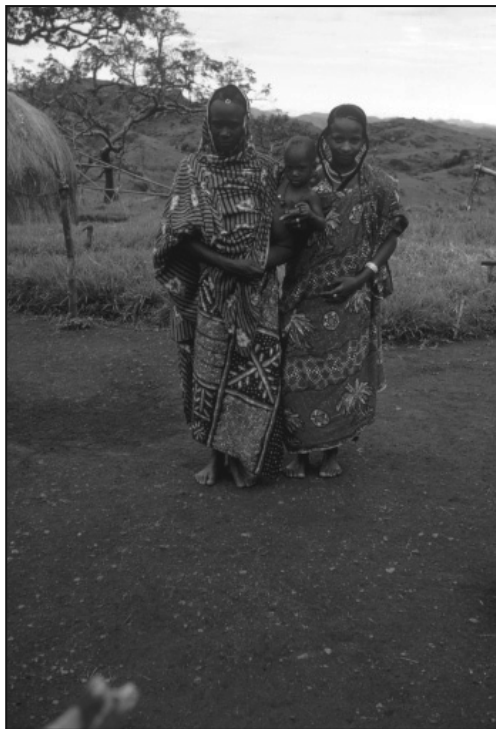
Pius, my cook



Market at Wum, 2 Fulani girls



Archu girls at Wem



Bororu girls at Kenene



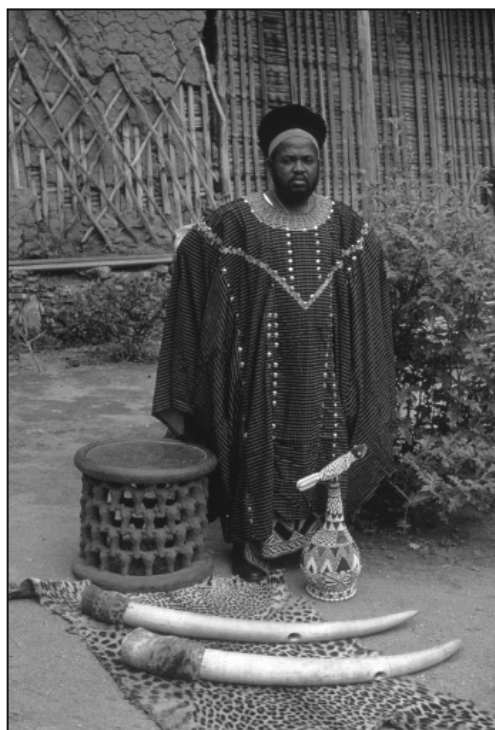
Bororu women



Tie-tie bridge



Bala, at Laager Bum



The Fon of Bum



The Fon of Bum in front of 'Old House' Laager Bum



The Fon's children



Little Girls



Women dancing at Itiaku



Fung, the hunter



Nigel with Frambo



John with Buba



The snake that frightened Buba



On safari, the white colonialist



Building at Save



Sawe - building



Chief Chu of Bu



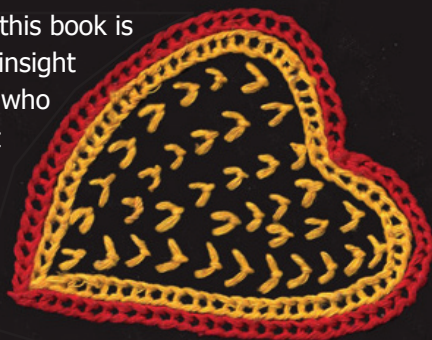
The Nkob



Wum Lake

"One of the major merits of this book is to provide us with a deeper insight into the role of those actors who have never been the subject of plebiscite studies, namely the Plebiscite Supervisory Officers." - **Piet Konings,**

**African Studies
Centre, Leiden, The
Netherlands**



The United Nations-organised plebiscite on 11 February 1961 was one of the most significant events in the history of the southern and northern parts of the British-administered trust territory in Cameroon. John Percival was sent by the then Colonial Office as part of the team to oversee the process. This book captures the story of the plebiscite in all its dimensions and intricacies and celebrates the author's admiration for things African through a series of reminiscences of what life was like in the 1960s, both for the Africans themselves and for John Percival as a very young man. The complex story is also a series of reflections about the effect of the modern world on Africa. It is a thorough, insightful, rich and enlightening first-hand source on a political landmark that has never been told before in this way. In a vivid style with a great sense of humour, Percival's witty, cogent, eyewitness and active-participant account deconstructs the rumours and misrepresentations about the February 1961 Plebiscite which was a prelude to reunification and to the present day politics of 'belonging' in Cameroon.

John Percival—Anthropologist, Writer, Television Broadcaster of many innovative BBC series on the environment, history and anthropology. As a young graduate he was recruited and sent to serve in the Southern Cameroons as a Plebiscite Supervisory Officer in 1961. He died in 2005 after a recent return visit to Cameroon with Nigel Wenban-Smith who writes an epilogue. This posthumous memoir has been edited by his wife, Lalage Neal.

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